PRETTY THINGS AROUND THE SUN

Stories by Alaina Newby

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To my father, for taking me to the fair,
to my mother, for letting me read another chapter,
and to my sister, for knocking on my door

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ABSRACT
ALAINA GRACE NEWBY: Pretty Things Around the Sun
(Under the direction of Tom Franklin)

The following thesis contains six short stories written from July 2016 to March 2017 in

Tupelo, Mississippi and Oxford, Mississippi.

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Introduction

My mother stacks books around the house. She piles them on her nightstand and shoves mounds under her bed. She has cookbooks in the living room because there's not enough space in the kitchen, and she comes home with new baskets so books can be stored in corners. Being a child in a house of stories was enchanting; my mother ensured that my wobbly bookshelf was full of books and never denied me a trip to the bookstore. When the yearly Scholastic book fair came to school, she let me choose what I wanted and even ordered some that I didn't. She gave me a limited number of chapters I could read before I had to flip the lamp switch and go to sleep. I held my breath as I sped through the pages, and instead of feeling tired, I only wanted more. A treehouse that traveled in time and a nanny who magically made children behave were fascinating and nothing like I saw in the world around me, and Junie B. was one of the best and funniest friends I had. There was no way I could leave, so I found my mother with her own book on the couch and asked if I could read one more chapter. Her answer was always the same, and I rejoined the pages.

Because I've read so many stories, my interest in constructing them does not surprise me. I had my first short story idea when I was eight. I was getting ready for bed when I imagined a young woman who was beautiful but didn't feel that she was. She participated in numerous beauty pageants until her perseverance paid off and a crown was placed on her head. The story was cheesy and quickly written because I was so

excited to write “The End” and read it to my parents. I dreamed of becoming the youngest published author and Nobel Prize winner with that story. Then I wrote about a baby boy and girl who fell in love in the hospital maternity ward. They grew older and got married, and I thought it was beautiful. A few years later I wrote about a girl named Maggie who didn’t like her name. My mother thought it was a cute story and told me to print copies, and I felt accomplished as I gave one to her and my grandmother.

Recently, while cleaning my closet, I found an old notebook with only the first few sentences of a short story penciled in looped handwriting. A girl looks out her window at the world around her and sighs that she needs an adventure. I’m not sure why I chose to cut her story short, and I don’t remember writing those words as I do my other stories, but something about the simplicity and abruptness of the lines struck me. I wondered if that girl was a character or a representation of myself. I might have only been writing a diary entry, or maybe I just put the pencil down and ran off to have an adventure of my own.

My middle and high school years were creatively fruitless. Creative writing was not a priority in the classroom, and I sometimes looked through my old composition notebooks and thought the stories were so terrible that I shouldn’t try again. Instead, I spent free time reading or counting the days until I could leave. I felt incredibly out of place among my classmates, and I worried community college would be the same. I was surprised. Maybe I stopped taking myself so seriously or maybe everyone just grew after graduation, but I no longer wished away the days. I was able to talk to others without stammering and blushing, and I gained a confidence in academics, particularly in my writing. There were no creative writing courses offered, but I sharpened my analytical

writing and received encouraging feedback. I read poetry and novels I had never heard of before, and the passion my instructors had for their craft ignited in me an even bigger interest in stories than before. When the pressures of declaring a major became unavoidable, I pushed my feelings aside for the sake of practicality and settled on a business degree. I enrolled in accounting and economics courses for the following fall semester, and I was miserable. I spent the summer pacing my house in dread of the upcoming school year. My mother asked me what it was that I loved, and when I told her English, she nodded. I changed my schedule the same day.

I applied to the Sally McDonnell Honors College at the University of Mississippi with the intention of writing a thesis on women in literature, but I was determined to revive my creative writing once I learned that a collection of short stories was also acceptable. Like the girl who longingly looked out her window, I needed an adventure. I was scared of going through four years of college with nothing to show for it but good grades, and I knew the thesis would push me to create something I could have pride in. Because I never had classes in the art of short story writing and felt clueless as a result, I took creative writing courses and learned how to better construct characters and their lives, paint a scene with detail, and craft a complex and engaging plot. I definitely do not claim to have everything about short story writing figured out, and I doubt anyone can honestly say they do, but my time in the courses forced me to see beneath the surface of a person and truly try to understand the psyche of a person instead. Because I was spending so much time delving into the minds and problems of fictional characters, I was also inevitably prompted to consider my own life and the stories that have followed and

shaped me over the years. Once I finished writing the stories for this collection, I realized that aspects of my life are in each.

I started “When the Birds Fly Over” during the fall semester of my junior year. I was enrolled in an introductory writing course, and one of the assignments was to write a scene of dialogue. I initially called it “To Be Birds” and wrote about two young sisters and their reactions to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Since childhood innocence was interrupted, I was interested in the fear that children felt after that day and the days that followed. Being six at the time, I don’t remember the chaos and grief that disturbed the country, but my mother told me I was anxious. I had a bad dream after the attacks and for the first time in my life asked to sleep with my parents. I had a seizure during the early hours of the next morning, resulting in tests and medicine for the next five years. Later, when asked what dream was so bad that I had to crawl into my parents’ bed, I said that two big birds flew into a building.

When my thesis proposal was approved, I knew immediately that I wanted a version of “To Be Birds” included in my collection. I decided against having the plot revolve around two sisters because, while I loved the scene I wrote, I felt it was not complicated enough for an intriguing story. I then considered creating a rebellious teenage character who comforts her younger, autistic brother through his fears of 9/11 and airplanes, but this soon fell flat when I proposed the plot to a friend. She said it sounded overused, and I agreed. I liked the idea of an autistic character, though, and I thought including him would give me a chance to explore a person I did not personally know. I knew I wanted this character to have someone else with him in the story, and that’s when I thought of Benny Foster. He’s a grumpy, obsessively clean grandfather

with an extremely superior demeanor who desperately needs someone to wake him up, but I grew to care for him as I was writing. Very few of his traits are similar to my father, like the way he orders necessities online and adores his recliner.

My favorite scene of the story is at the end, when the delivery man comforts Pierce despite his own fears of the airplane and another possible attack. While the story is ultimately Benny's, I thought including the man and a bit of his perspective was important to show that skin color and religion are not indicators of evil and that the person with adamant prejudice actually reveals the corruption in themselves.

The first draft of the story lacked a deeper connection between Benny and his wife. I was told to include a memory or two between the couple to provide more backstory and spark a change in Benny, so I added two memories to better develop the characters. Bev's goodness is revealed in her concern for others and the way she believes everyone is "somebody's baby." The last sentence of the story includes a line she said about her own son, but this time, it's as if she's saying it about the delivery man, reminding Benny that this man he is so against is someone's baby, too. While readers don't know what happens next, they expect a change in the way Benny lives his life and treats others.

As I worked on the thesis, my younger sister often witnessed my short anxiety attacks over the plot of a story. She came to my bedroom multiple times a day during weekends and stood beside my desk as I told her of ideas. I always asked, "Does that sound good?" after I spilled what I was thinking, and I felt relieved when she nodded. She probably got tired of walking in my bedroom only to see me in front of a computer with my only conversation being about stories, but her calming presence helped. It

always has. We find a comfort and deep friendship in each other that I feel so lucky to have. My bedroom has been our meeting place since we were young, and she still knocks on my door with a funny story to tell or questions about a school essay. I've often worried how our relationship will change once we're older with our own families and careers. I'm sure problems will magnify, and we'll talk over the phone in our separate homes rather than my bedroom.

The sisters in "Knuckle" are based off the fear of my sister having a problem I don't have a solution for. I created an older version of my sister and myself and used our middle names as character names. While the memories of childhood in the story are mostly true, I created the miscarriage storyline to explore how someone could help in that situation. Like I did with Pierce in "When the Birds Fly Over," I had to understand someone I didn't know. Miscarriage has never happened to a family member or friend of mine, and I personally don't understand the grief that's experienced in such an instance.

My first draft lacked clarification on Grace's problem. I had to be reminded that the story is hers, and it wasn't enough for her to wander her sister's home. I worked on giving complexity to the character instead; rather than simply wanting to help her sister, she also struggles with the severity of her sister's grief. I decided that this is Grace's problem; she wants to help her sister recover, but her limited understanding of the situation disillusions her and makes her first appear callous. Their childhood worries have been replaced by mature ones, and her plan to "make small snowmen" or "paint nails" reveals her attempt to solve a tremendous pain with minute and ineffective approaches. Her offer to clean at the end signals a change; Grace accepts Rae's grief as something that will have to fade on its own. Miscarriage is a heart-wrenching and lonely

circumstance, and for a loved one to question the validity of grief is a final punch to the chest. Instead, Grace tries to clean what has cluttered her sister's life and realizes that her presence is enough in the process.

I was in an advanced fiction workshop when the professor asked each student, "What are you scared to write?" My answer was race relations. I told the class I was afraid of being labeled a fraud because I didn't know what it meant to experience prejudice based on the color of my skin. I felt I didn't have any right to depict such problems. That same week we read an article about who is allowed to create what art in regards to race. It said that as long as the work is written well and created from a view of understanding, anyone can write a story. This was encouraging, but I was still afraid of exploring the subject while in a workshop. I worried the feedback would be too harsh and wanted to experiment on my own instead. When the professor announced the due date for our second story, he pushed us to write what we were afraid of, so I wrote "Coloring Home." I first thought of the difference between African-American manhood and white manhood, then I realized that even boyhood experiences must be different. I chose to expand this through an African-American child and his adoptive white father. Aiden sees the news and says he doesn't want to be black but because he's young, his comment is more of an observation than one made out of genuine fear. He moves on with his life while his father grapples with his son's comment and discovers a prejudice within himself in the process.

Aiden was too much of a victim in the first draft. He was fearful and only talked about race, and he wasn't believable. His father, on the other hand, was dramatic and terrified for his son. The entire story was too simple and sentimental. I then added

characteristics to Aiden to make him more childlike and rebellious and expanded the strain between his mother and father. Still, the story lacked a complexity that seemed to be hinted but not entirely focused. Because the story is written from the father's point of view, the true problem needed to exist within him. His firm belief in his impartiality shatters when his wife exposes his inward fear of African-American men, and he is forced to confront his feelings at the end of the story.

I think any adoption is beautiful. Opening a heart and home for a child who has no one is incredible and something I hope to do when I'm older, but I do believe there's a certain awareness that should guide interracial adoption. Experiences will be different and insight won't always be the best. Advice might be ineffective or come from a well-meaning but uninformed place. While loving a child is the most beautiful action an adoptive parent can do, understanding these differences is also important.

During the summer of 2016, before the start of my last year of college, I walked through my yard in search of inspiration for a story. I didn't find any. Bugs were flying, and I only lasted a few minutes in the heat before I went back inside. I've always hated Mississippi summers, and I proudly trade my sandals for boots when the season is over each year. The summer droned on, and I still had nothing to write. I told myself the story had to be good, but then I thought I was making everything too difficult. One afternoon, as I cleaned the tile grout in my bathroom, I thought of a story my mother told me. I had a great-great-grandmother who went blind in her old age, and on the day she died, she said, "All the pretty colors." That gave me the idea to write of a blind Mississippi boy and his best friend.

I first wrote “Pretty Things” with a focus on blind faith. Harvey was a boy who couldn’t see the world around him but believed he would see it after his last breath. The story was full of dialogue about God and church, but the first draft was extremely sentimental and unbelievable. I focused too much on the faith of young children and neglected other aspects of boyhood. I needed characteristics that would make the boys more authentic, so I included moments of rebellion. I also added a continuation of the story to show the boys in high school and adulthood. However, despite these changes, Harvey was still a victim of his circumstance and nothing more.

I decided to approach the story with a consideration for childhood innocence in an adult world. While Harvey is still blind and questions faith, those aspects do not drive the story. Instead, the friendship between the two among mature problems in a town of judgement is the main focus. Their classmates are harsh, suggesting parents’ views have already pervaded childhood virtue. Harvey and Topher are mischievous and sharp, but they don’t fully understand the realities around them. The boys are funny but the story is meant to be heartbreaking because they don’t realize the cruelty of the world just yet. The readers do, and they witness children who, on the edge of a mature realization, remain in the world of innocence for the time being.

I worked on “Pretty Things” longer than I did any other story in the collection. I debated the plot and reworked dialogue several times, but I’m still not sure if the story is finished. I have wondered if I care for the boys too much. They aren’t based off anyone I know and their experiences aren’t representative of my personal reality, but I feel a different degree of responsibility for Harvey and Topher that I don’t feel for my other characters. The boys and their story were my first attempt at crafting the thesis. Maybe

they represent the lost feeling I had when I stared at a blank document. I stood on the edge of short story writing with the belief I had fooled myself into thinking I could actually do it. The story began in fear and rigidity, but because I care for Harvey and Topher, I couldn't leave them out. They helped me establish a certain style and confidence in my stories that I didn't have before. They experienced the same terrible Mississippi summer and did things in school my younger self would have been too uptight and scared to do. The boys were good for me, and I hope they're happy wherever they end up.

My family pulled into our neighborhood on a Christmas night several years ago and saw flashing lights up the hill. We'd just been to my grandparents' house for dinner and a gift exchange, and the sight of multiple police cars among wreaths and hanging lights shocked us. We knew an older couple lived in the house and worried someone fell. It was a day or two later when we learned that the husband had shot himself during his family's Christmas gathering. I remember my initial reaction was one of disgust. I thought for a man to purposefully leave his wife alone was bad enough, but to do so when the entire family was around for a holiday gathering was something I had never heard of. His wife was on my mind a lot during that time. I wondered how she was coping and if she felt hatred for the man who left her like he did. I expressed these feelings to my mother, and she made a point I hadn't considered. She suggested the man chose Christmas night so his wife wouldn't be alone. Instead, she'd have someone's arms to fall into. I thought it was strangely beautiful. He was so deep in sadness but thought of her still, and I wonder if her name was on his mind as he pulled the trigger. Regardless, that Christmas night hasn't left me. It's haunting and heartbreaking, and I can't imagine being

in that house when the gun went off. I see his widow often. She likes to walk for exercise in the early morning. She smiles a little as she lifts her hand in a wave, then she looks at the road and continues on.

I got inspiration for "The Insurance Salesman" from that Christmas night of flashing blue. I wanted to explore a dysfunctional family and the burdens they each carry within the home. It's hinted that a cycle of abusive fatherhood affects Ned Bayer, and there is the possibility of the cycle repeating with Toby. His mother understands this while Toby doesn't, and although she lives with an abusive husband, she wants to ensure her son doesn't become a man like him. She views the gun as a catalyst that could trigger something in her son while Toby views it as a passage into manhood. He's inexperienced but has a realization about the adult world, which is a step towards maturity. I noticed that Toby is like an older version of Topher from "Pretty Things." This wasn't intended, but it's an interesting comparison. I wonder if my subconscious was trying to continue Topher's story.

I'm conflicted about the strange woman at Ned's funeral. I thought Carrie knew all along about the other woman but tolerated it because her arms were no longer bruised and her bones were no longer broken from mysterious falls. However, I also wonder if Toby's epiphany at the end of the story only applies to him. As he reenters his house, he might struggle with keeping such a secret from his mother. I think both of these are viable options, so I'm leaving the conclusion up for debate. Either way the ending is interpreted, Carrie is a strong female figure, and Toby realizes how good his mother is.

During my junior year of college, I spent a day with a friend over Christmas break. We joked about how worried we had been over our grades and ate at a great

restaurant in Oxford, Mississippi. I went home that night with a smile and walked in the kitchen to see my mother at the table. She was either making a grocery list or doing bills, and she said something in a tone that got my attention. There was a spot on my father's back that was melanoma. The doctor had caught it early and would need to cut a large incision. No treatment was needed, and the only medical measures that would have to be taken were annual blood tests and checkups. I was shocked as I stood in the kitchen. I knew melanoma was deadly; a good friend of my father's had struggled with it for years and came close to death a few times. I went to my bedroom and texted the friend I'd just left. Then I let out a long sigh after I realized how much worse it could have been. Once the doctor removed the spot a few days later, my father was so proud of the long scar on his back, and I was pretty impressed myself. He's still going strong.

I wrote "Around the Sun" as a reflection of my father and me. The severity of the cancer in the story is nothing like what my father experienced in reality, but I wanted to write about a girl and her father as they try to navigate change in their lives. I didn't name the characters because I wanted them to reflect any daughter and her father. They are the only speaking characters, making it easy to write them unnamed. I added more details to better pace the plot and create a clearer mental image since the story moves quickly through time.

The fair in the story is similar to the fair in my hometown. I remember going when I was young, and though I now realize it's a dirty and creaky parking lot fair, I thought it was magical at the time. My favorite ride was a more extreme version of the Teacups at Disney World. It spun and moved up and down small bumps, and anytime I went to the fair, I rode it several times. I climbed into a little cart with my cousin, and my

father always insisted on joining. He sat across from us and tried to stay conscious as we spun. We often had to wait at the trashcan for a few minutes after the ride just in case he got sick. I didn't understand why he went on the ride with me. I tried to tell him I was old enough to go by myself. It wasn't until recently I realized he was afraid I'd have a seizure, and if he waited on the sidelines with the rest of my family he wouldn't be able to do anything for me.

I realized near the end of my writing that I had stories devoted to both my sister and father, but none to my mother. She was diagnosed with breast cancer when I was a senior in high school, and in a beginning fiction workshop I wrote a story that was largely based off of her. I had originally planned on including the story in the thesis collection but knew it needed revising. Sentimentality seemed to flow through each page, and I cringed when I read it a few months later. I decided to rewrite the story with a more mature voice and less sentimentality, but I got through one and a half pages until I realized I wasn't making much progress. I think the story was so personal that writing about it creatively was too hard. While the story didn't make it in the collection, it served its purpose well. I was able to express many of the feelings I had experienced during the diagnosis and multiple surgeries and recoveries. While I hated not having a story devoted to my mother, I did include a small homage to her in "When the Birds Fly Over" by making Bev's favorite color purple. My mother loves purple, and I don't see it without thinking of her.

As I neared completion of the thesis, I realized that all the stories are essentially sad. Some have humor peppered throughout, but sadness is still an aspect. Each character experiences some sort of loss, like the loss of a person or the loss of childhood innocence.

Sometimes, like the father in “Coloring Home,” the loss occurs within oneself. Good comes from the sadness, though. Some characters have a realization that prompts them to change while others remember to embrace loved ones around them.

Writing of only difficult and heavy topics was not my intention, but I believe there are “pretty things” that come from the sadness because I’ve witnessed them myself. I am a daughter who cherishes the survivor that lives in each of her parents, and I’ve seen a widow walk in the sun. I’ve heard of miracles happening when they weren’t expected, like a blind woman seeing colors before her death. My goal for these stories is not that a reader will leave feeling hopeless but experience a revived faith in redemption. People heal and people change. When we all remember this, despite the occasional darkness that attempts to penetrate our lives, we realize there truly are pretty things around the sun.

When the Birds Fly Over

When Benny Foster sat in his recliner on that September morning and flipped on the news, the first words he mumbled were, “Well good grief.” He had never trusted those airplanes to get him anywhere in one piece. They liked to fly over all the time, and he’d look to the ceiling and tell them not to crash into his home. They could get the community service winner some streets over instead. As he lit a cigarette and watched smoke on the television, he thought of how smart he was to know a danger when he saw one. He pulled the recliner lever and took a long drag before he reached for the remote and changed the channel. Some young person yelled at him from behind the screen, telling him he needed to buy the camera because it had a state of the art zoom. He watched the small thing revolve on display. The young person ran her smooth fingers over the camera’s buttons and screen, then she demonstrated how nice the zoom was. When Benny took pictures of his plants with a disposable camera, he just moved closer if he wanted a zoom, and he told the television so before he flipped back to the news. Another tower had been struck, and an anchor said something about the nation’s security. “I had a feeling,” Benny mumbled.

The digital clock on the coffee table read 11 when he snored himself awake. Heat from the skylight warmed his raised feet, and he knew his droopy elephant ears out back would be appreciative. He rubbed his eyes as he watched the screen, where a tower had fallen during his doze, and he decided there was no sense in watching television all day when he could get some chores done. He leaned to slip on his sneakers and made his way

to the kitchen, where a slice of store-bought pecan pie was waiting in the refrigerator. It would be silly, he thought, to work on an empty stomach. After drinking a bottle of lemonade, he grabbed the wooden club he'd made from a fallen tree and opened the screen door leading to the backyard. He picked the dead blooms from his rosebushes and flattened the dirt around them with his shoe. Sweat ran down his forehead and into his eyes, and as he rubbed the sting away with his knuckle, he heard buzzing. Wasps had built a nest under the trim. He lifted his club to the roof. A rough poke sent the swarm out, fussing furiously as Benny hobbled away. He went to the front porch and was happy not to see any stray cats. He'd been firm with them, and they knew he didn't mess around.

In the early evening, after heating a slice of pizza and canned beans, he sat in the recliner and watched the news and wondered how many New Yorkers wished they could be in his dumpy South Carolina town now. Sirens lit the streets while crowds gathered to find those lost in the rubble, but outside Benny's front door, a quiet wind blew through the trees. The constant words scrolling across the screen made him sleepy, and he nodded himself awake several times before he got the phone call. People didn't usually call him, but when they did he refused to answer, believing if they truly wanted to talk to him they'd make the journey to his house. When the phone rang for the second time, he angrily jumped from the chair and walked to the kitchen as he yelled at the shrill.

He wished he'd let the ring go all night and into the next day. He'd barely spoken to his son since he came out as a Democrat during the 1992 election, and a woman's hoarse voice spoke in broken sentences, informing him that his boy jumped from the tower window during a monthly meeting. It was his daughter-in-law, Rose. She ended the

call. Benny stood with a hand in his pocket and the phone gripped with the other. His boy was born early, a small, weak thing that cried a lot. Benny had paced the waiting room when Bev was in labor. He looked at his wristwatch and smoked the whole time, only stopping in between cigarettes to sip some water from the fountain. It was 7:48 p.m. when he got to see Bev and the baby. She wore her favorite purple gown. She had deep circles under her eyes but smiled bigger than she did on their wedding day at the courthouse.

"Look at our boy, Benny," she said. She held the blue bundle towards him, so he sat before he took the boy. She smiled and said, "Isn't he beautiful?"

"Well gee, Bev," he said. He looked deep in the boy's blue eyes, but when Roy started to cry, he decided to hand him back.

The two never had much in common. While books and learning bored Benny, Roy spent his days reading textbooks and his nights studying for the next day's classes. He went north for college, only calling home when money was tight, and when he married the crazy northerner and named his son Pierce, Benny didn't much see the need in answering the phone anymore.

On his way to the recliner, screeches came from the front porch, and Benny grabbed the broom that was kept beside the door. He turned the knob and pulled slowly, allowing only a sliver of view so the cats couldn't see him. The black one was chewing on a shoelace from old mud shoes while the orange was rubbing itself all over the rocking chair. Fur was probably getting stuck in the chipping paint, and one thing Benny hated was animal hair. He flung the door wide with the broom in his hands and hollered. Watching those cats bolt across the lawn was one of his favorite sights, and he put a hand

over his bulging stomach as he laughed.

When he sat in the recliner, he reached for a cigarette on the end table and grabbed a lighter from his back pocket. He took a long drag and stared at the old picture of Bev framed above the television. She didn't like books, and she didn't finish eighth grade, but when young Roy asked her to read, the two sat on the floor as she stumbled over the words. Sometimes, when she got really frustrated, she'd point at the pictures and tell a story of her own. She was good at that. When Roy went to college, pride followed Bev to church and the grocery store as she told cashiers and baggers of her son's intelligence. She later taped Pierce's baby pictures on the refrigerator and carried extras in her purse. Once he was diagnosed at four, she researched and mailed articles to Roy. Bev loved her boy, and she would have caught him if she could.

Benny snubbed the cigarette and reached for another. His hands shook a little from the excitement with the cats, and he needed some help calming down. As he smoked he wondered what would happen to the kid. His mother was real nervous and had been in and out of hospitals since he was born, and she'd probably check herself in indefinitely now that Roy was gone.

Bev smiled from her frame, and Benny closed his eyes. He was too busy taking care of his plants and keeping the cats off the porch to worry with a kid. He liked black coffee in the morning and didn't think a boy would want something like that, and he liked having the television remote all for himself. Thursday mornings were his Walmart days. He ordered toilet paper and hand soap in bulk from the online site, but he still had to go to town for food. He didn't want to disturb that system, but Bev was still smiling when he opened his eyes, so he grunted and put out his cigarette and went to bed with a faint light

still outside. He woke the next morning and smoked a cigarette. He flipped through news stations and tried to really pay attention but Bev wouldn't stop looking at him. He stood on the porch with his hands on his hips but saw a small purple weed growing beside the bottom step post.

"Dern it!" he said.

He decided Bev wouldn't leave him alone until he took the boy. He went back inside and picked up the phone.

The days following were a huge annoyance. Once he contacted Rose and told her he could take Pierce for a while, she agreed much faster than Benny thought she would. He was a big hero for her, she said, because she'd been wondering what to do with him since she might need to check herself in again. Then pediatricians called about Pierce's medicines and monthly doctor visits. After the fourth call from the same squeaky-voiced doctor, Benny grunted that he wasn't a stupid man and slammed the phone on the wall. The school principal liked bugging him too. When Benny answered the phone, the woman spoke slowly as she explained Pierce's academic development. She asked if the boy would have good teachers when he left the city, and Benny yelled, "I'm a civilized man!" before he slammed the phone. He couldn't even turn on the television without being annoyed. Every time he sat in his recliner and pressed the power button, the news only talked about the towers. All sorts of security advisors discussed the Middle East and the people there. They might even be among us, they said. Benny grunted. He'd known that for a long time, and only now people were realizing the danger the country was in.

He decided he'd let Pierce have Roy's old room. After he moved, Benny used the space as storage for tax files and boxes of old bottles that he'd recycle one day. A twin

bed was still under the window with the patchwork quilt Bev made for Roy's tenth birthday, so he washed the sheets and fluffed the pillows. The boxes were pushed to one wall because there was nowhere in the house they could go. He told himself he'd take those bottles to the recycling center soon. He'd get a lot of money for those.

Two weeks after the towers fell, Rose called on a Saturday morning and said she'd have to drive Pierce down to South Carolina because he refused a plane ride. Her car turned into Benny's gravel drive on a chilly Tuesday night while he stood on the porch with his thumbs in his blue jean pockets. Rose popped the trunk and grabbed the luggage, but the boy didn't help. Instead, he stood beside the car and kicked the front tire. He was lanky with a pimply complexion, and his nose scrunched like it smelled expired food. Rose held two suitcases as she walked from the car and stepped onto the porch. Her hair was in small tangles, and her face was bare except for red lipstick that made her lips look bigger than Benny remembered. She was stressed, she said, because Pierce didn't let her turn on the radio the entire drive. Benny nodded and cleared his throat then asked if he could take the luggage inside. Rose looked back at the boy as he picked blades of grass and mumbled to himself. When she faced Benny again, wrinkles were jumbled on her forehead, and she said robotically, "I will do it thank you" and walked inside.

Benny wanted to take the luggage because he got tongue tied when forced to make conversation. Pierce watched him, and when the two met eyes, he walked the grassy path to the porch.

"Hello, boy."

Silence followed, and Benny wondered if the boy had gone deaf.

"Remember me?" he asked.

Pierce wouldn't remember him, since he was only two days old when they met, but Benny was just trying to make some small talk. Bev had insisted on flying to New York after Roy called and said Rose was in labor. From what Benny saw on the news, the city was a nasty place full of hippies and bad air, and when he told his wife so, she yelled and cried. Benny grumpily agreed to go, but they'd drive to save money. At the hospital, he told Roy that he'd named his son after a British butler, and Bev decided she should visit alone. She flew twice a year while Benny sat in his recliner.

The boy stared at the ground, and Benny's hands were sweaty. He wondered why he didn't just look away from Bev's smiling picture. Then he would be smoking alone in his recliner instead of in this mess. The door behind him opened, and Rose said, "I'll be going, then."

She tapped Benny's back as she passed him and put her arms around Pierce's stiff body. She squeezed his waist and smiled so hard her cheeks swelled and the lipstick on her front teeth shone in full view. She said, "You start school Friday!" and seemed to have a bounce in her step as she walked away. Benny knew he should offer to let her stay the night, but he was already nervous, and crazy Rose seemed to have found a revived energy, so he just nodded and waved as she made her way to the car.

Pierce kept his eyes down as he walked to the front door and into the house. He shut the door, rudely leaving Benny standing outside. It must be a New York thing, he wondered, because no one in South Carolina would do that. He walked inside and didn't see Pierce, but he heard springs coming from Roy's room. Benny grunted and walked down the hall. The boy sat on the bed's edge and bounced. He smiled and watched as the mattress dipped and rose again. Benny rubbed his chin between his thumb and index

finger and said, “Your daddy did the same thing.”

He soon found that Pierce wasn’t like his daddy at all and was in fact a whole different kind of person than he was used to. For dinner that night Benny warmed two cans of soup, but Pierce only moaned and pushed the plastic bowl across the table. The spilled soup stayed there while Benny slurped his and watched the boy with squinted eyes, but he only stared at the wall. After the bowls were thrown away and the table was wiped, he walked to the living room and looked for the remote. He never moved it from the end table, so the kid must have disturbed the order of the entire room. Once he found the remote under a couch cushion, he turned to see Pierce sitting in the recliner.

“Boy, you sit here,” Benny said as he pointed to the couch. Pierce acted like he couldn’t comprehend and watched the black television screen. He gripped the armrests and rocked.

“You’re insulting that recliner,” he grumbled. He plopped himself on the couch and jabbed the power button on the remote. The boy really was disturbing the system, and he sent some thoughts to Bev’s frame to tell her so. Pierce grunted. His lower lip puckered while he squinted, and he lifted a finger to the frame and grunted again.

Benny pointed and said, “That’s your ole grandma. You know her.”

As Benny watched the news with a cigarette in his hand, screeches came from the porch. Benny jumped and made his way to the door. He grabbed the broom and said, “Come on boy!” He would show him the importance of keeping cats off personal property. Benny jumped from the small step of the doorway and landed with his feet slightly apart. The looks on those cats’ faces made him howl with laughter, and he moved the broom around as he yelled. The orange one ran several feet before stopping to lick

itself while the black one hid under the porch steps. Once he felt the job was finished, he beat the broom's handle on the wooden planks below and bellowed a loud "Ha!"

When he turned he was stopped by Pierce. He stood frozen in the doorway with a contorted mouth and crazed eyes darting from the broom to Benny's triumphant grin. He bolted forward and punched the bulge of his grandfather's stomach with weakly-formed fists. His tight lips muffled screams while tears ran down his cheeks.

"Stop boy!" Benny dropped the broom and grabbed Pierce by the arms. Punches still flew, though less forceful, and Benny worried his soup would come up if the boy didn't stop. The whines grew louder with each attempt to escape, and when Benny shook him hard with no change in behavior, he let him go and stepped away. The boy ran down the porch steps to meet the orange cat who'd stopped licking but stayed to watch the scene. He bent and poked both ears before he scratched its head and whimpered. The black sneak who hid under the stairs crept and rubbed against Pierce's tennis shoe.

"You're ruining the system!" Benny worked hard to keep his porch looking nice, and the boy really didn't need to mess that up, but he proceeded to pet them both. Maybe he was like his daddy, both of them sissies.

"Well," he grunted, "come in when you're done, then."

Benny woke at six the next morning. He hadn't used an alarm clock since his twenties, and he believed he had a talent. Once he popped his toes and brushed a hand over the bit of hair on his head, he stood and rubbed his stomach. The house was quiet, and he almost forgot it had another occupant. He crossed the hall to Roy's old room and peeked in, but the bed was still crisply made. Surely the boy didn't get up before he did, Benny thought, because that would be unusual for a thirteen-year-old. His recliner and

the living room were empty, and the kitchen looked untouched. The house was still. Sweat dampened his palms. He was worried the boy had run off into the woods somewhere with those cats, and he would go to jail because he let him stay out there alone. Benny had never been to jail and couldn't go today because town day was the next morning, and he expected a package of toilet paper and soap this afternoon. He would tell the police that he heard the door open before he completely fell asleep, and that was the truth. He thought the boy had come inside for bed.

Benny lit a cigarette with shaking hands, then he paced the living room and wondered what he was to do now. This would really put Rose in the institution forever. Bev smiled from above the television, so Benny stopped and said, "You just stop it now!" She'd always been getting him into situations he didn't much care for, and he decided that picture really needed to move.

Soft laughter sounded outside, and Benny put out his cigarette and grabbed the broom. He flung open the door to find Pierce with his head on a pillow and the two cats on his stomach.

"Boy!"

Pierce lifted his head and turned. He smiled when he saw Benny and pointed to the cats.

"I see! You've ruined the system!"

The orange cat jumped from Pierce and ran to the porch with its tail standing straight. The furry thing stopped on a step and looked at the rocking chair. It wanted to rub its hair all over Benny's furniture, no doubt. Benny cursed through tight lips and stomped inside. He needed to sit in his recliner and have a long discussion with Bev. The

remote lay on the end table, and he grabbed it before he sat. He rubbed his thumbs over the remote's buttons and eyed the picture.

"You've gotten me in this mess," he said.

She only smiled, so he added, "You know it?"

He grumbled as he reached for the lever and turned on the television. Loud roars sounded overhead, and Benny thought planes should wait until a more respectful hour to fly over a person's house. He couldn't hear what the news anchor was saying, so he turned up the volume. Pictures of men were arranged on the screen. "I knew it," Benny mumbled.

The anchorman cut to commercials, and Benny muted the television. Short whines were going on outside, and he guessed the cats didn't like Pierce too much anymore. The sound grew louder until full-blown wails echoed throughout the yard and into the house. That was Pierce. Benny grabbed the broom and ran outside, looking around the yard for the delinquent who'd stepped on his property and scared the boy. Instead, he only saw the kid bent over with his hands over his ears. The cats were nowhere around. The broom thudded on the porch as Benny stood still and looked around, lost. He stepped down and put his hands on his hips and cleared his throat.

"Boy?"

Pierce screamed louder. Maybe he couldn't hear over the planes above, so Benny yelled, "What's wrong, huh?" He approached the boy slowly with his fists clenched, just in case his stomach was about get punched again. Tears streaked Pierce's cheeks and T-shirt. His eyes darted above, and each time he screamed louder.

"Calm down, son." He put a hand on Pierce's shoulder but was shrugged away.

The neighbors would call the police if the boy didn't hush. "It's just an airplane, see?"

He wasn't much help, so he stood with his thumbs in his pockets and watched the sky. Once the plane was long gone and the only sounds were chirping birds and Pierce's whimpers, Benny suggested they go inside.

That afternoon Benny sat in the rocking chair on the porch while Pierce napped in Roy's room. Bits of road were clear through the trees, and he watched as cars passed. Watching the traffic was part of his daily routine. After he warmed soup or a frozen pizza, he'd grip the armrests of the rocking chair and watch the neighbors come and go. In just the forty minutes since he'd been sitting there the young woman who lived across the street had driven up and down her driveway two times. He couldn't imagine living like that, always coming and going.

On the days he expected a package he watched for the delivery truck as well, and those were his favorite. The loud vehicle usually chugged up the drive around 2:17, but Benny's wristwatch read 2:53. He really needed his bulk order that day because Pierce had already used a roll of toilet paper, and there were only two left. He stood and walked around the house to pass time. In the backyard, he stopped to check on his plants. He placed his hands on his hips and mumbled about how nice they looked, then he checked under the roof for any wasp nests. Large tires driving over gravel sounded in the front yard, and Benny looked at his watch. His package was nearly an hour late.

"About time," Benny yelled over the engine in the driveway. The van's door was open, and thumps came from the back. He stood with his arms crossed over his large stomach and sighed. A box thudded on the ground, and Benny saw feet drop from the truck.

"I'm sorry, first day."

The man carrying the bulky package was not the usual deliverer. Instead, he looked like the men on the news. Benny couldn't understand why his life had gone south so suddenly, and he sure didn't deserve for it to. He liked to drink occasionally and curse at the cats on his porch, but he believed he was a good person overall. When truckers tossed plastic cups out their windows and on the highway, he cleaned them up. The town owed a lot to his dedication, but when the old oaf two streets over won the award for community service, Benny let the trash pile up on the side of the road and even threw some out himself for good measure. He might have been good, but he wouldn't break his back for nothing.

Benny tensed and glanced towards the front door. The gun was hidden in the drawer of his bedside table, but the broom might work if he could get to it fast enough. The man set the package before Benny's feet and said, "That's a big box."

Commenting on a person's deliveries was rude, and Benny told the man so before grabbing the package. The box was lighter than usual.

"Is my lemon hand soap not in here?" he asked.

The man cleared his throat and hurried to the driver's seat. After flipping through stapled pages, he said, "It's not with me. Might be here tomorrow."

This had never happened before. Benny's toilet paper and soap always came in the same box because he ordered them on the same day. He wouldn't let a new delivery man disturb the structure of prompt service for the entire town, so he said, "It should be here today. You should have the soap, you know."

The man stepped into the back of the van and slid boxes around, whistling a tune

all the while. His voice echoed as he said, “I’m not seeing it.” He hopped down and stood before Benny with a slight grin. The man shouldn’t be so calm, Benny thought, because his job was on the line.

Benny motioned to the house with his index finger and said, “There’s a boy in there who needs soap today.”

“It might be in this box here.” The man looked at the package between the two. “Let’s check to find out.”

He pointed to the box and raised his eyebrows like he was asking permission. Benny grunted and threw his hands to the air. The man took a small knife from his back pocket, and Benny tensed. A man like this one should know not to carry around a knife in the current climate because someone might get the wrong idea. Once the package was opened and searched with no soap found, the man stood and smiled.

“You’re right. Soap isn’t here,” he said.

“Course I’m right!”

“I’m sorry. Maybe I’ll be back tomorrow with it.” The man lifted his cap and scratched his head. Once his hair was smooth, he strolled to the driver’s side and climbed into the seat. He smiled and waved, and Benny took the package and turned without returning the gesture.

Benny and Pierce went to the store the next morning. The two got there at eight, and they passed the produce section and instead grabbed frozen meals from the freezers. Bev would have bought some fruit for the boy, but after Benny once brought home bright yellow bananas instead of green, he decided to stay away from that particular department. Although there was a special sale for three frozen pizzas, Benny only placed two in the

cart. Stores were always on the lookout for fools.

They made their way to the dairy, but the boy wandered to the candy aisle instead. Benny yelled for him to come back, and after being ignored, he grunted and followed. The cart's wheels squeaked as he rushed to catch up. Pierce had stopped at the end of the aisle and held a bag of neon worms in his hand. He placed it in the cart then opened another bag.

"Boy!"

Pierce stuffed the worms in his mouth and scrunched his eyes and mouth. "See, they're not so good and I've got to pay for them now!" Benny said. The boy only smiled and ate more. Benny grabbed the unopened bag and started to put it back on the shelf, but Pierce whined and held out his hand. A fit in the store was not what Benny wanted to deal with on a Thursday morning, so he threw the bag in the cart and huffed. He figured New York kids were spoiled, and Roy should be ashamed of raising a kid in a place like that.

They stood in the express lane twenty minutes later with eight items and an empty bag of worms. Pierce flipped through a tabloid and laughed at the women in bikinis while Benny jingled the change in his pocket. The young woman in front of them bought all sorts of green food and dug in her purse for coupons while the cashier bagged. Benny placed his items on the conveyer belt, and Pierce slid a magazine behind a gallon of moving milk. He scratched his nose and watched the automatic doors open and close. Benny sighed and said, "Boy," but he didn't have the energy to deal with a fit, so he payed the extra ten dollars and grumbled all the way to the car.

After Benny ate a frozen pizza and Pierce emptied the other bag of worms for

lunch, the two gathered supplies for school the next day. The new school had mailed a letter of needed materials, but Benny found old notebooks and pencils and placed them in Roy's old backpack. He told Pierce there was no need in spending money on things that were already in the house, but to prevent a fit, he bought a blue pencil sharpener that morning. As Benny smoked in the recliner and Pierce circled the living room with his arms through backpack straps, a clatter came from the porch. He dropped the bag and ran outside, leaving the door open. Benny huffed and looked at Bev. She smiled, and her round, dimpled cheeks seemed extra pink. He'd told himself her picture needed to move after hanging for eight years, but he couldn't do it. She was the one he shared a smile with before bed.

Through the open door, Benny saw the boy and the cats. He told Bev, "Just look at that. My whole system is ruined" and gripped the armrests as he rose. He stepped on the porch and closed the door behind him, and the orange annoyance rubbed against his leg. Hair clung to his jeans, and as he bent to brush them the black one ran to meet his hand.

"Now look here!" The cats only pranced back to Pierce, who sat in the grass. Orange and black strands spotted the chipped rocking chair, but Benny sat without brushing the seat. He figured that stuff multiplied and would only stick to his palms.

As he watched traffic, Benny decided that good drivers were rare. When he was young, the speed limit was sacred, and only delinquents dared to defy it. The side mirrors were crucial for any driver but were artifacts now as the woman across the street had backed into her flower bed on her way down the driveway. He'd never hit a thing in his life and didn't plan on it. Bev only had one wreck, and Benny had been in the passenger

seat. They were on their way to a play at the community theatre. He didn't want to go, but she bought two tickets and told him he was going. They passed a homeless man on their way. He held a sign and had a scraggly beard.

"I'll bet he smells awful," Benny said.

Bev looked and said, "We should give him something."

"Keep driving."

She didn't stop for the man but scrunched her eyebrows and pressed her lips in a tight line. She glanced in the rearview mirror several times as they drove further away. Benny yelled but it was too late. She had rammed the car into the back of another one. She put a hand to her heart and breathed fast.

"If you hadn't been worrying over that rotten bum!" Benny yelled. He opened the glove compartment and grabbed the insurance.

Bev said, "That's somebody's baby, Benny."

He heard Pierce's laughter. The cats took turns walking up and down his lanky legs and were so content Benny could hear the purrs from his seat. "Those cats aren't staying here," he said, but the boy didn't look up and scratched the cats' ears instead.

A low, distant rumbling sounded from the right. Thinking it was thunder, Benny stood and searched the sky for a cloud, but bright blue painted the vaporless sky. The sound neared, and Pierce pushed the cats aside as he stood.

"How about we go inside, now?" Benny asked. He really didn't want another fit because the neighbors would start to think the boy was being mistreated. Pierce stood frozen with a grimace and eyes wide with fear. Rumbling grew louder and echoed around them, but the plane was hidden behind the trees lining the lot's edge.

"Come on!"

Pierce threw his hands over his ears and bent as the plane flew over trees and came into view. His wails scared the cats out of the yard and into the road, where they barely avoided a hit by the delivery truck turning into the driveway. Benny cursed under his breath and stepped from the porch. He didn't have time to deal with an incompetent delivery man just now, and his watch indicated that the truck was the earliest it had ever been. This man couldn't work whenever he liked, and Benny planned on demanding he follow a schedule.

When the man parked and jumped from the driver's seat, he stopped at the back of the van and asked, "Is everything alright?" He glanced from the whimpering Pierce to Benny, a hand shielding his eyes from the sun's glare. Although the plane had already crossed over the house, its roar still vibrated throughout the trees, and Pierce's hands still cupped his ears.

"He's scared of the planes, see," Benny said. With his thumbs in his pockets, he ambled through the grass towards the van. He figured his agitation yesterday taught the man not to mess with a years-old system, and he took the small package and shook. He could tell by the weight that his soap was in there, so he said, "That's better." The man didn't acknowledge the comment. Instead he watched the boy with wrinkled concern etched into his face.

"Why is he afraid?" he asked.

"I figure it's the noise. Loud and scary to him, I guess."

The man nodded and looked to the sky. Benny wondered if he had a television and watched the news. If he did, he really shouldn't feel so comfortable standing around

on another man's property like he was because a neighbor might think he was up to something. Bev was telling him not to do it, but the man lingered around wasting Benny's time after all, so he said, "Those towers fell hard."

He watched the man for any sign of guilt but was only answered with, "They did, yes."

"You know, my boy jumped from one of them. Couldn't even stay to fight."

"He was very brave."

"Brave!"

The man watched Pierce, who bent to pick blades of grass, and a pitying expression set deep in his brown eyes. He nodded and said, "I'm scared of heights."

He removed his cap and smoothed his hair. Benny wondered if the man would stand there all day, so he grunted and turned. On his way to the porch he stopped beside Pierce and whispered, "Go on inside, now." The boy shrugged him away and spun around. Benny stepped onto the porch and glanced. The man stood there still, watching Pierce with narrowed eyes. No delivery man should stand around like that, and Benny figured this was why his package was late yesterday. The rocking chair creaked as he sat and dug a small knife from his front pocket. The sound of packing tape slicing open made him giddy, and the three soap containers inside the box made him jump from his seat and start for the door. The hall bathroom had been out of hand soap for two days, so he needed to restock.

The man said, "Have a nice day."

Benny said, "Goodbye" before he shut the door.

After the soap pump was twisted and the extras were stored in a medicine cabinet,

he stretched in his recliner and turned on the television. Desperate people were trying to win money on a game show, and he changed the channel once he told them how much they'd lose to taxes. He grunted and jabbed the power button when he saw news anchors fighting over the president and the men's photos. Even his favorite channel was an annoyance because of those people.

He closed his eyes and quickly started to doze when rumbling vibrated Bev's frame on the wall. Pierce whimpered outside. Benny decided the airport would need to adjust its route because he wasn't much help to the boy. He stood and complained to Bev before he opened the door. Pierce's bent back faced the porch, and his arms crossed over his chest. The delivery man bent beside Pierce, who didn't wail or shout but held himself as the plane crossed over treetops.

Benny grabbed the broom and told the man to get out. He was not wanted here, Benny said. But two backs faced him still, and two heads tilted to the sky as a silver plane roared. Then the man did the oddest thing. He pointed upward, hand shaking, and said, "Look, a bird. Isn't it pretty?"

Benny watched the dark, hairy delivery man and the spindly boy with a lot in his head but no way to release it to the world around him. There they stood, the oddest pair he'd ever seen, under the roaring of a plane. He stepped from the porch and into the grass. He gripped the broom tighter. He opened his mouth to call Pierce inside and tell the man to leave, but he heard a voice, as if she were standing right beside him, say, "Isn't he beautiful?"

Knuckle

As she walks the stone path to her sister's front door, she goes over what to do. "Come on, now," she can say. She can pull the sheets from Rae's folded body, and if she refuses to move, she can part the curtains to reveal the starry sky. She can say, "Look how many there are tonight. Look how pretty." If the worn brush is still in the bathroom drawer among scattered Q-tips and cotton balls, Grace can dump the drawer's contents on the bed and suggest they style hair or make small snowmen like they made as children. While the glue dries, she can prepare dinner: a whole-wheat tortilla with spinach and shredded cheese. Grilled chicken too, if there is any. Once she washes the plates and wipes the table with a damp cloth, she can suggest a movie or a bath. They can circle the yard if her sister wants. Her husband's car is gone, so they can paint nails and listen to music if he doesn't come back for a while. She wants her visit to make Rae better. She wants her to rise into strength again.

There is silence on the other side of the door after Grace rings the doorbell. She lifts a potted plant and grabs the key and is surprised when she flips the kitchen light. Rae had lived spotlessly when she was young-- her bed crisply made each morning, every trinket in its place on her desk. Their mother entrusted the home's care to her by age twelve. Rae would have floors mopped, oak furniture dusted, and toilets scrubbed before noon, and she willingly did the same the next week. On weekend visits to Grace's college apartment, she organized the closet by season and cleaned the bathroom drawers of Band-Aid wrappers and flattened toothpaste tubes. Rae fussed at the mess, but she smiled once

the place was clean.

Now, cluttered papers pile atop the kitchen counters and trash overflows onto the floor. The dishes are in a sink of cloudy water while soggy bits of food float on the surface. Grace walks in the living room to see unopened mail scattered across the couch. The wooden floors lack their usual gleam, and as she walks the hallway to her sister's bedroom, her boot heels beat against the cherry. She remembers hearing her name as she sat on shag carpet surrounded by dolls. "Grace," her sister would say, and without waiting for a reply she opened the door and sat beside her. The years changed us, she thinks. Now she calls her sister's name softly as she approaches the door. Only darkness can be seen through the crack, and she knocks once.

"Rae," she says, but no answer follows.

The hinges creak as she steps through the doorway, and when she flips the light switch a bundle of blankets move as Rae turns from her side. Bloodshot and droopy, her eyes look as if they haven't found rest in days. Crinkled tissues litter the floor beside the bed. Rae grips the corner of a blanket and parts and closes her lips, then she moves to her side and rests her head on a flattened pillow.

"It's me again."

Rae is silent. Grace inches toward the bed, and the heels of her boots are muffled by the bedroom's carpet. The plan she had made is jumbled. She puts her hands on the iron footboard and asks, "Do you want dinner?"

Rae shakes her head. Grace lifts a hand to push hair behind her ear, and dust from the iron coats her fingertips. She rubs them against her jeans and sits on the edge of the bed.

She doesn't know what to do. She is in her sister's bedroom on a bed the two jumped on in the evenings before dinner. The springs of the mattress would sound in the kitchen, and their mother yelled from behind the stove for them to stop. They would fall, she said. After Rae bounced from the bed's edge and scraped her knee on the carpet, they heeded their mother's advice and dressed in sequined skirts and plastic heels from a painted chest in Grace's room. As she held the hair from her neck, impersonating old Hollywood actresses from old films that played in the living room, she remembered the words of their mother. She'd told them they'd always have a friend, and as Rae clanked awkwardly around the room in heels that were sizes too big, she thought of how lucky she was that her mother's words were true. She remembered the sound of small feet against pine, becoming louder with each step, a clear indication that Rae was bearing news or curiosity and would soon knock on Grace's bedroom door, expecting an invitation inside. She entered with a request for a doll or puzzle, but if denied, she sat on the floor and observed Grace as she wrote stories, content with her company.

Yet there were times Grace shunned the role given her. She sometimes adjusted a gate in the doorframe of her bedroom to keep her sister away. It was the gate that kept them from scalding kitchen appliances or bathroom chemicals. She drew pictures or brushed a doll's hair while Rae cried in the hallway. When the wails grew too irritating, she opened the door for Rae to watch. The barrier was too tall for her to climb. Grace covered herself with a quilt at night and laid her head on a lace pillowcase, and she wondered if something was wrong with her.

They aged, and the footsteps grew louder, the knock bolder. Their mother's words proved true still. Their friendship flourished during Grace's middle school years, and for

a while, her sister was the only friend she had. Kids her age attended school dances on weekends, but she watched movies or rode bicycles with Rae, and she thought she was lucky to have her. Years passed, and the concerns of school and relationships were brought through Grace's bedroom door and spilled in an untidy jumble of words while she sat at her desk with piles of college coursework, offering one or two-word replies in attempted, but shallow, guidance. She stared into Rae's searching eyes and often felt the irritation of seemingly minor problems in comparison to her impending deadlines, and her sister would stop mid-sentence and turn from the room, grumbling of invisibility.

The two say nothing. Only the light brown curls on Rae's temple poke from the sheet while quick, deep breaths issue from her chest. The bundled blankets rise and fall with the rhythm. The window opposite the bed is covered by curtains that hang to the floor. Grace parts them and lifts the blinds. The light seeps into the bedroom and onto the bedspread.

"Do you see how bright they are? Don't you want to see?" Grace asks.

Rae shakes her head.

"You'll feel better if you get up."

Rae slowly moves her legs under the covers as if metal flows through them and rubs the blanket between her fingers. It's almost childlike, the way her eyes glaze and her mouth twitches as she watches the floor.

Grace says nothing but stands with her arms hanging at her side. She feels awkward, like she did when she first found out about the pregnancy during dinner at their parents' house. Their mother cried while their father clapped. Rae covered her mouth and laughed, and Daniel twisted the wedding band around his finger and grinned. Grace sat at

the end of the table and smiled as she continued to eat, but no one seemed to notice.

"I'll just be in the living room, then," Grace says.

The door creaks when she leaves. Her heels click as she walks into the kitchen to look at the pictures on the refrigerator. There's one of their parents at the zoo held by a magnet from Mexico City. A picture of Rae with a track medal around her neck is beside it. The picture their mother used to have on her fridge is in a clear, magnetic frame by the handle. Grace and Rae are in an empty laundry basket with their feet dangling over the side. They're wearing pajama gowns, and Rae's lips are puckered. On the other door of the fridge is a calendar, and "Dr." is written in green pen for the next week. A small, smiling face is drawn beside it.

It was around 9:40 last Monday night when Grace got the call. She was getting ready for bed after a day of typing documents for a lawyer in town. Daniel was on the other end.

"She's alright, isn't she?" she asked.

"She won't let me do anything. I'm just staying out of her way."

"Do I need to come?"

"I think so, yeah."

Daniel opened the door as she parked in the driveway. She heard running water when she walked inside. He lead Grace to the bathroom, where Rae scrubbed the white toilet and tile. She wore an oversized T-shirt and was on her knees with her back to the door.

"She won't stop," he said.

Grace stepped forward. "There's nothing there, Rae."

Rae stood and washed her hands. She watched the floor as she walked from the bathroom to the bedroom. Grace followed. Rae got in the bed and mumbled, “It was so bad.”

“I know.”

“I can’t believe it.”

Grace approached the bed and put her hands on the footboard.

“I know,” she said, “but it’s better it happened now, right?”

“What?”

“I only mean you weren’t attached yet.”

Rae’s eyes and nose turned red as she said, “Get out and close the door.”

Grace walked past a closed door of the extra bedroom on her way to the kitchen and wondered how a person like her sister could fall into grief so easily. Always known for practicality and strength, Rae exhibited a sadness she’d never shown before, and Grace didn’t know how to navigate around her. No one had met the child, felt a kick, or witnessed growth. It was too early to tell the sex, but Rae bought bags of pink clothes. She said she had a feeling. A small, white dress with pink roses at the collar was folded in a box in the extra bedroom. She would have worn it home.

Daniel sat at the table with a glass of water in his hand. Grace shrugged and he shook his head. His face lacked emotion as he stared at a cabinet handle. She sat beside him. They listened as muffled wails came from the bedroom, and after an hour, Rae fell into a fitful sleep of occasional shouts and moans. Grace thought there was nothing more pitiful than trying to escape and finding sorrow still, and she couldn’t stand to listen.

“I don’t know if there’s anything I can do,” she said, and she walked out the front

door and drove away.

Grace looks back at Rae's puckered lips in the picture. She looks at the gold medal around her neck and the smile on her face. Down the hall, she's under a mound of covers like the dolls they used to put to bed. Her house is a mess.

She moves slowly, considering each step, and wonders if Rae is asleep or crying into the blanket she refuses to release from her grip. Grace stops when she reaches the closed door. If her sister is asleep she can leave a small note on her bedside table and slip away, but she's afraid to find the unmoving, glazed eyes that make her feel helpless.

She lifts a hand and knocks, but there's no answer. She turns the knob and calls her sister's name, but there is only silence. The hinges creak as she pushes the door. Rae is in the same spot. Her eyes are wide and unmoving.

"What can I do, Rae?"

"Nothing."

Grace looks at the wadded tissue on the floor and thinks of the dishes in the sink and the dust on the furniture. "Can I clean for you, then?"

Rae glances at the window and nods. "Don't go in her room."

Grace walks to the kitchen, and she rinses the piled dishes and runs the dishwasher. She sorts the mail and throws away advertisements and small envelopes from their parents' old church members. She grabs disinfectant cloths from under the sink and scrapes dried food stuck on the counters, and she wipes a rag over dusty furniture. There's a mop and floor cleaner in the laundry room, so she cleans the hardwood. Rae scrubbed the tile and toilet so vigorously last week that it seems unnecessary to clean again. Rae's lips pucker from the fridge, so Grace reaches for a bucket of cleaning

supplies and passes the extra bedroom on her way to the bathroom.

She steps onto the white floor tile and flips the light switch that reveals green walls. The toilet sits under a small window that Rae keeps covered with a lace curtain, and a heart-shaped box is on the sill. Grace sets the bucket on the floor and searches for a spray bottle. She scrubs grout between the shower tile and rinses remaining specks with warm water. She wipes dust from the mirror and cleans the handles on the sink. She places supplies neatly in the bucket and stands still. The toilet still looks clean from last week, but she opens a container of rosemary-scented wipes and kneels. She watches the floor tile as she cleans and looks around when she's done. There is nothing more to do, so she takes the bucket and flips the light, leaving the smell of rosemary in the dark room like flowers on a grave.

Coloring Home

"I don't think I want to be black anymore."

Aiden's feet dangled back and forth from the chair and his index finger rubbed his runny nose. He tore his eyes from the television to look around the waiting room and offered a soft smile, as if he'd merely commented on the weather.

Conversations muted, coughing and turning pages subsided, and eyes darted from me to him. An old man across the room lifted and pointed his cane at me then Aiden. He asked, "Is he yours?"

Aiden looked at me, waiting for the reply that would surprise the room. I nodded, and the man sat back in his chair while a young woman coughed loudly. He gripped the curve of his cane and asked Aiden, "You like to fish?"

"No. I like turtles."

A white woman who appeared to be in her forties sat in the corner, and as she tapped a rolled magazine against her knee, she smiled at me.

I gave a curt nod. I looked around as the sound of flipping pages and conversations began again, and a man caught my eye across the room. Three empty chairs separated him from the white woman; his dark skin was engraved in wrinkles, and his stooped shoulders were covered in a faded blue jean jacket. Aiden moved his head to each side and kicked his feet as if a song was playing, and the man watched him. He lifted his eyes to the television, where national protests were shown in succession, then he watched Aiden again. As if in slow motion, his eyes met mine, and I held his gaze until

he looked to the screen, picking his cuticles to the beat of the shouts.

The drive home was quiet. Aiden sniffed in his booster seat and held the round sucker he'd been given by the doctor. The white paper bag holding his cold medicine crinkled when I drove over potholes, and with each bump I was reminded by the doctor's suggestion. He'd knocked on the door before strutting in the room, a manila folder in his grip and a wide grin on his face. After high-fiving Aiden and shaking my hand, he grabbed an otoscope from the wall to look in Aiden's throat and ears and asked me how life was going. I told him that we were great, that Aiden loved school, his bedroom, and science. He then asked if there were behavioral issues, and I shook my head but stopped. I said, "He doesn't have a filter."

He put the otoscope on the wall and told me that was normal for a five-year-old, but if I was concerned my wife and I should go to a support group for adoptive parents. He told me about a group that met every Tuesday night in the fellowship hall of a local church, and I could take Aiden to the free childcare provided by an older church member.

I glanced in the rearview mirror to see Aiden asleep, the white stick of his sucker balancing between his lips. We'd adopted him four years ago, and from the moment we were emailed his picture, we loved him. As Terri and I were in the Denver courthouse, standing before the judge as the social worker bounced Aiden on her knee, I felt as if my entire days on earth were nothing in comparison to who I was about to hold. I was more excited than I'd ever been.

The pothole on 34th Avenue rattled the medicine bag, and Aiden smacked his lips as he woke. I turned into the cemented driveway of our red-bricked, green-shuttered townhome, positioned near the road and side by side with the neighbors'. Once I

unbuckled Aiden's booster seat, we walked through the front door and into the stuffily-heated living room. Terri sat in an armchair with an open book in her hands. She asked Aiden, "How did it go?"

He coughed and shook his head then grabbed a throw blanket that was folded beside him. She looked at me and asked the same question, her tone more aggressive and her eyebrows furrowed. I was holding the medicine bag at my side and bounced it against my leg. "Just a cold," I said.

After Terri poured a purple liquid into a medicine cup and convinced Aiden to drink it, he fell asleep to the hum of the television. I was in our bedroom, stretched across the tattered comforter and watching the revolving fan blades above me, when I heard her feet hit each wooden stair. She walked into the room with a plastic hamper and hung shirts in the closet. She didn't say anything, and she hummed a tune I'd never heard before. Her auburn hair was clipped at the back of her head like it was the day I first saw her in Georgia. We were in the same sophomore literature class, and on the first day of the fall semester, she sat in the front while I chose a seat near the back. She'd give her conclusions of books like a court judge, eloquently and straight-backed, as I chewed my pencil eraser and watched her hairclip bounce. She was a member of the Student Rights Association on campus, so I joined.

She closed the closet door and walked to the bed. In my peripheral, she studied the books on her nightstand and switched on the lamp. I felt hypnotized by the blades when I heard her say, "He told me what he saw." She released a long sigh, and I sat up on the edge of the bed.

"I couldn't control the television."

"I don't want that to scare him."

She ran her finger over the spines of her books. The weight and shock of Aiden's waiting room declaration made me so nervous that I picked at a loose string on the comforter, and when Terri told me to stop, I blurted out his words like a guilty child confessing to breaking a vase. She laughed then sat on the bed and started to play with another loose string.

"Why is that funny?"

She let go of the string and opened her mouth in a grin. "He just says whatever he wants. I love that about him."

"This is serious."

"He didn't seem very upset when he told me about the news. "

"But it's serious for us. What do we do?"

I'd been going over that question in my head since we followed a nurse to a smaller room, the remaining waiters talking to each other as we walked by them. I was afraid they were talking about Aiden. I expected that reaction in Georgia, where my parents were worried about me having a black roommate in college, but when Terri and I moved out of the south after graduation, we both believed we were leaving prejudice there.

I watched Terri as she broke a string and twisted it between her fingers. She said nothing. The fan blades slashed the air in a blur, and I said, "Let's get help."

"Like a counselor?" She sounded defensive.

"Or a support group, maybe."

The bed moved as she stood, and I watched her slowly walk to the mirror. "We're

good parents," she told her reflection.

"I didn't say we weren't."

She turned around to look at me. "What support group?"

I told her about my conversation with Aiden's doctor. Terri said she wouldn't go to a church support group and leave her son with strangers so that we could sit in a circle and talk about our problems, but I said, "It wouldn't hurt to go."

"You can go if you're so worried."

"It would be better for Aiden if we both went."

She entered the closet and grabbed the hamper she'd brought up earlier. I watched her hairclip as she walked through the bedroom and to the door. She stopped, and without turning to look at me, said, "Fine. But I think you're being silly."

We drove to the church the next Tuesday. The GPS said our location was less than five minutes away, but the drive seemed endless. Although his cold was gone, Aiden pretended to have coughing fits. He coughed and gagged so much I worried he'd make himself sick, and when I told him to stop, he claimed he needed to use the bathroom and suggested we go back to the house. He gave up the act when we pulled into the parking lot. With slate gray stones and arches leading to each door, the church looked like a medieval cottage surrounded by modern stores and delis.

"I don't want to go in there," he said.

"You'll make new friends," Terri said.

Aiden sat in his booster seat with his hands covering the buckle and looked at me. The intensity of his brown eyes made me guilty, like I really shouldn't make him go inside. Terri looked over my shoulder and sighed.

She said, “They will love you, come on.”

He slid from his booster seat and took my hand as he jumped from the car. He ran ahead of us and Terri yelled for him to stop. He stopped and twisted his shoe in the concrete like he was squishing a bug. A man with his hands in an oversized jacket walked through the lot. Aiden waved, but the man watched his feet. When Terri and I caught up with Aiden, I put my hand on his shoulder and lead him to the wooden doors of the church. I pressed a button on my keys to make sure the car was locked before I opened the door and walked inside.

The church’s modernity surprised me. The entrance walls were painted burnt orange, and coffee stations were placed throughout the hall. As we walked our shoes resonated on the tiled floor, and Aiden stomped his own tune- a jumble of beats pulsing throughout the building. The children’s area was down another hallway with sky blue walls and gray carpet that looked spotted by old vomit. Aiden grabbed my pant leg as an old woman stood from her rocking chair and walked toward us, her teeth beaming. She told Aiden that the other kids were playing with blocks, and he should join them. I felt his grip on my pant leg tighten, but once Terri patted his shoulder, he formed an “O” with his lips, exhaled, and walked forward.

Terri and I followed signs with arrows that lead to the meeting room. We walked through hallways and took multiple turns before we heard chatter and laughter. Terri stopped before she walked in and said, “I hope this doesn’t take too long.”

About six couples stood in the room. They were in small, circled groups and didn’t seem to notice us. Plastic chairs had been arranged in a circle, and a plate of cookies and a bowl of red punch were on a corner table. We sat in chairs that hadn’t

already been claimed with a purse or keys. A middle-aged man turned from a couple and clapped. That must have been the signal to begin, because everyone got quiet and sat.

I bounced my feet as the man asked Terri and me introduce ourselves to the circle of couples. Terri went first, sitting straight and recounting our move from Georgia, our failed infertility treatments, and Aiden's adoption. She told them about our parents and how they were worried of what people would say, but they loved Aiden all the same.

As she spoke, others nodded like she was a political figure they wanted to follow. Her hands moved through the air when she discussed how smart Aiden was, and laughter rumbled throughout the room when she told of his attempts to get out of coming to the church. Although the group seemed to love her, I could tell Terri was not interested in being there. As the group around us laughed, her smile transformed into a tight grimace and she gulped before starting the show again. She waited for the room to silence before she talked about her job at the publishing company. Her hands moved faster in the air, and she looked happy. When she finished, she leaned back in her chair and turned to me. There was nothing left to offer, so I rubbed my knees and said, "And I'm Aiden's dad."

After introductions, other parents spoke about temper tantrums and nightmares. The support group leader suggested books for adoptive parents and child psychologists for troubled children.

"Remember, prayer is important, too," he said.

I huffed.

The man looked at me and asked, "Something wrong, Chris?"

Terri looked at me, eyes wide and threatening, as if she were conveying that I'd better speak up and act right since it was my fault we were there in the first place.

“Our son doesn’t want to be black. I don’t know if prayer is enough for that,” I said.

The man leaned back in his chair and held his bearded chin between his thumb and index finger. The woman beside Terri crossed and uncrossed her legs, and some of the couples glanced at each other. The man took his fingers from his chin and leaned forward, positioning his hands in front of him like he was going to pray.

“And what made him say that?” he asked.

“The news,” I said.

He nodded and leaned back, his face relaxed, and said, “Well he’s lucky. He’s got good parents.” He continued nodding as if he’d solved all our problems in a single night and was proud of his achievement.

I twisted my hands and asked, “What does that have to do with anything?”

“If the two of you raise him right and pray along the way, he will be fine.”

“But when he’s grown--”

“He will still be fine.” The group leader softly smiled. I looked around the circle, and others nodded.

I said, “I just don’t want people seeing him and making assumptions.”

Terri shifted in her seat. I could see her watching me from the corner of my eye, and when I turned, her lips twitched.

A man said, “You know, I worry about the same thing with my girl and her limp.”

The group leader turned in his seat and held his chin. He questioned the man and his wife about their daughter, and I didn’t say anything else.

When the hour was up, the man clapped and pushed his glasses up the bridge of

his nose. “I will pray before we end for the night,” he said.

I stood before the resounding “Amen.” Terri grabbed her purse from under her chair, and we kept our eyes on the floor as we left the room. When we reached the childcare area, we watched Aiden through the glass in the door before entering. He was at a table in the corner with crayons scattered around him. He held a green crayon as he made quick lines on the bottom of the page before him. The tip of his tongue touched his upper lip in concentration. In the middle of the room, a group of boys were making train tracks out of wooden blocks, and the old woman was holding a doll as two girls brushed its hair. Aiden stopped coloring when we opened the door. He grinned as he flung the crayons in a plastic bin and grabbed his drawing. The woman smiled and told us how sweet and quiet he was as he ran to us, clutching the paper so tightly that it crimped at the top. As we walked into the bitter air and through the parking lot, Aiden lifted his picture and asked me to look. I removed a hand from my coat pocket and took the paper to see that he’d drawn the three of us in the grass. I had long lines for legs, and my head was a small ring among the scribbled sky. Terri was drawn much shorter with a wide smile and fiery hair. In between us was Aiden, drawn in a black crayon.

Once we got home, I flipped through television channels while Aiden was on his knees in front of the coffee table. Ninja Turtle action figures and wooden blocks were scattered on the floor around him, and he gripped GI Joe and bounced him on the table legs.

“He has to save the turtles in jail,” Aiden said.

I passed a news channel, where the screen was split between a white man and a video recorded by a witness. Aiden glanced at the television then grabbed blocks to stack

on the table surface, and I asked him if he was excited for picture day the next morning.

He continued stacking blocks as he said, “Yes. I already laid out what I’m wearing.”

From the dining room where she was answering work emails, I heard Terri say, “You aren’t wearing that shirt.”

He looked at me with wide eyes and arched eyebrows.

I asked, “What shirt?”

“My Michelangelo shirt.”

Terri said, “It won’t look right in the picture.”

Aiden frowned and returned to his tower of blocks. He mumbled, “I look good in that shirt.”

“Why don’t you wear your suit? And the tie I bought you?” I asked. I bought the blue clip-on tie from a toy store because it looked like the one I wore to work.

From the dining room, Terri said, “That’s good. Wear that.”

Aiden only shrugged.

It took forty minutes to put him to bed. Once he brushed his teeth Terri read chapter four of *A Wrinkle in Time.* Then he insisted he needed water. Once I took him water, he asked if there was a full moon out. That’s when I said, “I don’t know,” he said, “I should probably check,” and Terri yelled from our bedroom, “Go to sleep!”

When I walked down the short hallway and into our room, Terri had changed into a purple t-shirt and was putting her hair in a bun in front of a mirror. She said nothing as I entered the room, and I sniffed to make sure she knew I was there. I passed behind the mirror and saw her eyes follow me.

"Is everything alright?" I asked.

She turned from the mirror and walked into the bathroom without looking at me. I heard a drawer open and close. Then she said, "That was a waste of time."

"I know."

"But you shouldn't have said that in a church. We were guests there." She walked out of the bathroom with a tube of lotion in her hand.

"We have a real problem and he didn't give very practical advice."

Terri walked back into the bathroom and opened and closed a drawer. She switched the light off when she came out, and she watched the carpet as she walked to the bed. "He was just trying to help you."

She removed the pillows from her side of the bed and turned her back to me as she placed them on the floor.

"Us," I said.

As she climbed into bed she said, "What," as if she were stating a fact rather than asking a question. She grabbed a book from her bedside table and opened it near the end. I changed into flannel pajama bottoms and an old t-shirt. I got into bed and turned on my side, my back facing her, and mumbled, "He was trying to help us."

I woke Aiden the next morning for school, gently shaking him as he buried his face into his pillow. We walked down the stairs together and into the kitchen. Terri was reading the morning paper. She'd already made waffles and set the plates on the table. I walked to the refrigerator, where Aiden's drawing was hung with an alphabet magnet, and I grabbed a carton of milk to pour into three plastic cups. Terri mindlessly held a waffle and ate it like a pizza as she kept her eyes on the paper while Aiden poked holes in

his with a fork.

After I told him to eat, he said, “I think I’m going to wear my shirt.”

Without looking away from the paper, Terri informed him that he was not wearing an ugly turtle shirt to school. I smiled at him and shrugged. He shrugged back and poked his fork in the middle of a waffle, lifting it to his mouth and taking small bites. Terri turned the page and slightly shook the paper, her face hidden and the front page our only view. A picture of the man that Aiden had seen on the waiting room television was beside a large article. I looked at Aiden to see his head moving side to side as he stared out the window.

When he came from his bedroom dressed in his suit and tie, I said, “You look just like your old man. Doesn’t he look like a natural?”

Terri ran to our bedroom to get a digital camera. She made him stand next to the window so she could take photos with different angles and poses.

“Now let’s take some outside,” she said.

I grabbed the keys and said, “No, we’re already running late.”

I looked in the rearview mirror as I drove to Aiden’s school and saw him staring out the window. He was quiet, so I changed the radio station until I found one playing music instead of the news. My eyes shifted from the road to the clock. I had twenty minutes to get to the school and then to work, and the traffic was congested to an almost complete halt. My thumbs drummed the steering wheel as an eighties song from a band I didn’t particularly like started to play. I jabbed the buttons to change the station but couldn’t find any music, so I just turned the volume down.

After another hundred feet, traffic stopped. Ahead, blue lights flashed and sirens

blared. I told Aiden that we'd be stuck a while as I searched for my phone to call my boss. After the call, I glanced in the rearview mirror to see Aiden moving his head from side to side with a grin on his face. I asked him what he was so happy about.

"I don't have to go to school."

I turned around in my seat and said, "You still have to go to school, and I still have to go to work. We'll just be late."

"Oh."

"I thought you liked school."

The corner of his mouth twitched, and he looked to the car's ceiling like he was thinking. He said, "I like Ms. May. I like science." He opened his mouth as if he were going to say more, but he stopped and looked out the window.

"Is there something you don't like?" I asked.

"I don't like the people in my class."

I turned to see that traffic was still unmoving.

"Why not? Are they mean to you?"

"No. They're just loud and like playing cowboys but I don't."

"Are you nice to them?"

"Yes."

"Hmph."

He scratched his head with his index finger and looked out the window. "And they say I don't look like my mom and dad."

Ahead, I saw the traffic slowly move. I changed the gear and eased my foot on the gas pedal, creeping towards the police that were directing cars around a wreck. As we

neared the officers, Aiden asked if I'd ever gotten in trouble.

"Sure, when I was little. When I was ten I got some dirt on my mom's new rug," I said as I maneuvered around a dented truck.

"Did the police come to your house?"

"Of course not."

"Well that's good."

After I got to Aiden's school and reminded him to smile for his picture, I walked into work an hour late. I picked up the phone to call Terri. She answered professionally, and when I said "Hey," she asked, "What's wrong?"

I quietly said, "We've got to talk."

I got to the park before Terri, so I sat on a bench with my hands in my coat pockets. The sun shone, and the wind whipped through leafless tree branches. A father held the hand of his young son as they kicked through snow. When Aiden was two, I'd kick a soccer ball with him until the light of day dimmed. We'd walk up the stairs and into the bathroom, where I scrubbed him and Terri told him stories as he stirred the tub water so vigorously that my shirt was speckled once he had finished. After I chased his naked body with a dry towel, we'd sit in a rocking chair before I put him to bed. We reviewed the alphabet, and when he asked to see the moon, I lifted the curtain covering his window. He'd then ask questions about the world that I didn't have the answers for, like how many stacked people it would take to touch a star and what kind of grass grows in Alaska. Once Terri told him to go to sleep, I crawled into bed wondering if I was smart enough to be his father.

Snow crunched behind me and I heard Terri ask, "Why would we meet out here?"

I turned around to see her walking toward me wearing a large coat and a scarf wrapped close to her face. She held her purse near her body, like she was gaining extra warmth from its fabric.

I stared at the frost in front of me as she sat. I could feel her gaze, expecting an explanation as to why I wanted to meet in a cold park, but I was silent. We'd gotten the call from the social worker in this park, but I don't think she remembered. She set her purse on the other side of her. Then she leaned forward with her elbows on her knees and rested her chin in her palms.

I took my hands out of my pockets and entwined them. My thumbs jittered against each other, and I said, "I don't know what I'm doing."

She straightened her back and rubbed her palms over her knees. She asked, "What do you mean?"

"How am I supposed to help him? How are we supposed to help him when we have no clue what it's like to be him?"

"He's five."

"He's five and he already knows he's different. The kids at school know it too."

I was close to shouting, and Terri widened her eyes to quieten me. She was shaking from the cold, and she asked if we could take a walk.

On the path, our eyes squinted in the sun and our hair fanned in the wind. Terri said nothing, so I said, "We can't follow him around his entire life. When he's driving, when he walks down a sidewalk, we can't be there. He's a cute kid now, but what about when he's grown?"

She shook her head slightly and said, "I think you're overreacting, Chris."

I dropped my hand and hung it limply at my side. “Maybe you aren’t reacting enough.”

Terri titled her head and squinted. “What do you mean?”

“Do you ever wonder if we’re the problem?”

She kept her head tilted and her gaze on me, then she straightened her back and widened her eyes. “How dare you.”

“Maybe we took him from a problem and just put him in a different one.”

“We saved him,” she said. When I didn’t reply, she adjusted the purse hanging from her shoulder and continued. “Do not pretend to be superior. Maybe I should protect him from you. The way you tell me to walk faster when we’re in the street.”

“Stop it.”

“Did you think that man in the church parking lot was going to take our car? He was just walking to get food.”

“We aren’t talking about him.”

“Will you be scared of our son when he’s grown?”

“God, stop it.”

She lowered her eyes from mine and studied her feet as she shifted them in the frost. I stepped forward and walked through the curved course, leaving her standing alone.

That evening after dinner, I sat at the table with my face in my hands. Without speaking, Terri and I had washed the dishes and swept the floor, and now the room’s only light was from a small, old lamp in a counter corner. I don’t know how long I sat, thinking about a lot but feeling like I wasn’t thinking at all. In her pink slippers, Terri

padded through the kitchen, and I looked up to see her glancing at me but saying nothing. She opened and shut the cabinets and turned around, leaving empty handed.

Minutes passed until I heard a chair scrape across the tile and lifted my eyes. Aiden sat across from me in his blue flannel pajamas and held a piece of paper in front of him. He grinned and slid his hand across the table, eyes dashing between the paper and me. He'd received a perfect score on his math test, and a golden star was stuck beside his shakily written name. I smiled and said, "You're so smart."

He straightened his back and lifted folded hands in front of his chest, like he was holding my words in his palms.

"I'm going to be a doctor," he said. The corners of his eyes wrinkled as his teeth shone.

He stood with the paper in his hand and walked to a cabinet drawer near the telephone. He shuffled the contents until he found a magnet, and he hung his test next to his drawing.

I heard Terri down the hall. She called Aiden for bed, and I looked at him and shrugged.

"Guess you better go, then," I said.

He scratched his cheek and looked around the kitchen, then he fixed his eyes on me and said, "I need some water."

I stood and walked to the cabinet. He requested his favorite green cup, so I set it on the countertop. He stood tiptoed at the sink, and I turned the knob. When the cup was half full, he sipped slowly as he walked to the refrigerator. His finger outlined the drawing, brushing over my tall form, Terri's red hair, and his black arms. He looked at

me with raised eyebrows, and I nodded in approval. The star on his test glared in the lamplight, and Aiden squished his thumb against it. He turned from his work and walked in small circles as he sipped.

I stared at the golden star, stuck to the page, knowing its corners would slowly fray with age and one day fall off. I watched Aiden's bare feet shuffle across the tile and his head tilt sideways, back and forth, like a song was pulsing through his body and only he could feel it.

Terri walked down the hall and said, "Come on," so he set the cup in the sink and followed her to his bedroom. The old lamp flickered as I watched the two of them walk away.

Pretty Things

In the dry heat of a Mississippi summer, when trees were lush with green and sweat rolled down my cheeks, I found comfort in Harvey Jasper. He was the best friend I had. We were two ruddy things that played in the dirt for fun and got into all sorts of trouble at school. Our meeting was destined in the stars, we liked to say, because we were placed in the same playpen every week at the community center while our mothers played bingo. He was blind and rowdy while I could see and was a little quiet, so I guess we were good for each other.

It was an August Monday when I left my house on the grassy hill and made my way to Harvey's square on the dusty lawn. Harvey stood on the porch with his cane poking around his mother's potted plants, and when I called from the side of the road, a grin stretched across his face. He walked down the steps quickly, like he knew exactly where each foot should go. About that time, his mother opened the screen door.

"You be careful," she said.

Harvey spun his cane, creating a cloud of dust around him, and said, "I'll try but probably won't be any good."

That made his mother scrunch her face and shake her head.

We walked the mile like we were turtles walking across the road. Neither of us cared for school that much because Miss Kirby talked to us like we were small. She always made us say a nice sentence about our day and clapped at the end like she was proud of us for being grateful. We took our seats in the middle of the room and waited for

her to come in and start blabbing.

"I'll bet you a nickel you can't trip somebody," I said.

"Shoot. Bet you a quarter I can," Harvey said.

He licked his lips real slow like he was concentrating. A scrawny boy walked in and made his way to a seat in the back. When Harvey heard the footsteps, he stuck his cane out and made the kid trip.

"Well I don't have a quarter," I said, "but that was good."

"What about a nickel?"

"I don't have that either."

Miss Kirby walked in right after the scrawny kid sat at his desk. I shot him my best tough look so he wouldn't tell on us, and he snarled his lips like a dog but kept quiet.

Miss Kirby said, "The sun is shining. Now let's all say something nice."

A lot of the kids talked about church for their happy sentence. They talked about the songs they sung and the crafts they made in Sunday school. When Miss Kirby asked what everyone wore the previous day, Harvey loudly recalled his outfit.

"I wore my brown suit that makes me look like John Wayne," he said.

Bonnie Jones swerved in her seat, her brown curls swooshing so much I thought they'd slap my face and said, "Harvey Jasper, your mama don't even take you to church."

The other kids laughed, and I heard mean Henry Poole say, "And she sure don't belong there."

Harvey didn't miss a beat. He said, "Shut your ugly mouth, Bonnie!"

I wasn't sure if he heard Henry, but even if he did, he would never test him. That boy was as mean as a bull. Miss Kirby clapped and told Harvey he needed to stand in the

corner. He clicked his cane to the front and stood with his back to us all.

On the walk home from school, Harvey said, “That ole Bonnie sure likes to gab about other people’s business.”

“You know how she is.”

“I’d like to trip her with my cane.”

“Let’s do it tomorrow during lunch.”

“She sounds kind of pretty though, doesn’t she?”

“Harvey! You like Bonnie?”

He blushed. “You shut up.”

Harvey maneuvered his cane across the dusty road, back and forth, back and forth. He didn’t say anything for a few minutes, so I didn’t either. Then he stopped.

“I wonder why my mama don’t take me to church.”

From the little bit I’d heard my father say, Harvey’s daddy died in the war five days after Harvey was born, and Ms. Viola never stepped inside a church again.

“Probably ‘cause it’s boring,” I said.

“Have you ever been?”

“Sure, a few times.”

“Tell me what it looks like. Is it real pretty?”

My family never went to church all that much. When taxes were due, my father loaded my mother and me in the Plymouth so we could go pray. My mother once told me that when I was two years old, she took me to church and asked the preacher if I was possessed because I had flushed her silver earrings down the toilet that morning.

“I don’t go that much. It’s nothing special,” I said.

"Is it like a big castle?"

"Naw. I wish it was a castle. It's just this small, white building. And a white cross sits on the very top of it, on the very pointy top. And there's bushes and flowers right around the door where bees like to buzz and scare the women that walk in. Inside there's a room called the sanctuary. It's got dark wooden floors and pews that blend with them. You have to look real close to see that the pews and floor are separate. Then you sit down and wait for the singing to start."

"What do you do while you wait? Play games?"

"There's not much to do and there aren't any games to play. You just have to sit there until the old ladies sing. Then the preacher stands up and starts shouting."

"I'm glad my mama don't take me then," Harvey said, but when we got to his house that afternoon, he asked if we could play church.

His biggest dream was to be a famous actor. We liked to play like the Westerns with Harvey as John Wayne and me as a thieving criminal. I always had to be the criminal because Harvey had a cane for a gun and I didn't.

"I'll pretend to be a crazy preacher and you sit in the congregation," he said.

We called his two mutts from the doghouses and made them sit while I sat on a tree stump. Harvey put his hands in the air, and in the deepest voice I'd ever heard come from a boy our age, said, "Welcome to church." Then he took his cane and pretended to be a John Wayne preacher. He flung it around and made shooting noises with his mouth. The dogs ran back to their houses.

"You're gonna hit me with that thing!" I yelled.

"I will hit the sin out of you."

He didn't even break character, and I was real impressed.

That night during dinner, after we'd acted an important scene where thieves break into the church and John Wayne the preacher has to stop them, Ms. Viola stirred her soup and asked, "What was that you two were playing earlier?"

"Shootin'," said Harvey.

"Shooting? Shooting what?" she asked, and I noticed her eyebrows and her voice got higher.

"Thieves in the church, " I said.

"And they tried to hurt everyone," said Harvey, "but I got them."

Ms. Viola stared at her soup and said, "Goodness."

"It's our favorite game," Harvey said.

Ms. Viola pushed hair behind her ears, and I felt bad for her because she was probably thinking about Harvey's daddy.

"I don't like shootin' all that much," I said.

"Aw hush. You like it just fine," Harvey said. He held his spoon and slurped. I looked at Ms. Viola and made a funny face to make her laugh.

After I walked through my front door that evening, I heard my parents talking about me in the kitchen.

"I wish he'd make other friends," my mother said.

She didn't like me hanging around Harvey too much. She said his head was either in the clouds or stuck in a corner and that I would do much better if I found some other friends to spend my time with. She thought Harvey's mother was an unhappy woman and might leave a negative impression on me. Those two were like cowboys and Indians. I

don’t think they spoke to each other, not even when they played bingo over and over when Harvey and me were little.

Viola Jasper only went so she could win money for the bills. That’s what my mother liked to say. She often brought it up over dinner, like the memory had made its home in her brain and wouldn’t leave. She said Ms. Viola came in late every week, after three or four games had already been played. She sat and brushed her stringy hair from her face, then started to place her chips on her card like she’d been there the whole time. My mother said she and all the other ladies thought that was cheating, coming in just for the last game, but she figured the caller felt bad for her and let her play anyway.

A deep voice said, “The poor boy needs someone though. Topher is good for being nice to him.”

My father liked Harvey. He used to take me to his house when I was too little to go alone. Harvey and me played with blocks or ran around the backyard with sticks, and after an hour or so my father said it was time for us to go back to my mother.

“He’s around that house too much.”

“He’ll do what he wants eventually, anyhow,” my father said.

He often calmed my mother by being unconcerned about almost everything, except taxes. I was scared of him sometimes, not because he was mean, but because he walked around real tall and had a deep voice.

My mother hissed something I couldn’t understand. I inched closer to the doorframe.

“Don’t think I don’t know. You and that broken woman.” She made a noise like she was spitting, and I heard her heels beat against the tile as she left the kitchen. My

father's big loafers went after her.

I stepped back and hit my foot on a potted fern, but I ran out the door before my mother could yell at me. I pounded my feet all the way to Harvey's house.

Ms. Viola opened the door and said, "Topher. Is everything alright?"

I was out of breath and my cheeks felt like they were on fire. "I forgot to tell Harvey something."

"He's in the backyard."

I pushed past her and ran to the kitchen. I heard Ms. Viola ask if I needed a glass of water, but I was already out the door.

When I stepped onto the back porch, I couldn't see Harvey. He liked to walk in circles after dinner because he said it was good for his digestion, but I was afraid he'd walked far away and gotten lost until I heard a distant thumping sound and saw him beating his cane against a tree.

"Harvey!" I ran to him, dust flying all around me. "Harvey, what are you doing?"

"I'm beating this tree!"

Harvey's eyes were red, and his hair stuck up in different places. He had dust on his clothes and face like he'd rolled around with his dogs. He made mean grunting noises as he pounded the cane, and I noticed it was bent in the middle.

"What's wrong?"

"After you left I told my mama I wanted to go to Hollywood and be in the Westerns."

"Oh alright. Well listen, Harvey--"

"But she said she'd never have the money to send me."

“I heard my mama say something about my daddy and a broken woman. She sounded real mad.”

Harvey didn’t seem to care much. He walked in circles and mumbled about his mother under his breath. One of the dogs roamed with his nose to the ground while the other slept. None of them were too worried.

“My daddy isn’t a doctor,” I said, “so he doesn’t fix broken bones.”

The roaming dog started to dig a hole. Dirt flew behind him, and he stuck his nose in the ground and sniffed. Harvey wiped his nose on his hand. I found a twig and sat on a tree stump. I drew lines in the dirt. I had never heard my mother talk like that to anyone, especially my father, and I wondered if he got mad at her after I left.

“Should we go to church and pray?” Harvey asked.

“What for?”

“For the woman with the broken bones.”

“I don’t know how to get there.” My father turned the steering wheel a lot when we did go to church, so I thought it was probably far away in the woods.

Harvey stopped and said, “Oh.” Then he started to cry. “Can’t we go anyway?”

The soup was probably messing with Harvey’s stomach because he didn’t ever cry. I wasn’t sure if John Wayne did either, so I thought Harvey might have been messing with me.

“Aw you baby! What kind of show is this, huh?” I asked.

He held up his cane like he was going to hit me. I clenched my fists so I could swing if I needed to. Fresh tears made tracks through the dust on Harvey’s cheeks, and snot was gathered on his upper lip. He looked like a rabid animal with his hazy eyes fixed

above my head. Then he lowered his arm and drug his bent cane through the dirt as he walked in circles. He sniffed and licked his lips. I thought he was about to deliver a monologue, so I relaxed my hands and didn't say anything.

"It don't matter anyway. One day I'll jump on a jet and be in the Westerns and see everything," he said. He held his cane as high as he could and shook it at the stars. "You hear that? It don't even matter!" Harvey sat in the dust and put his cane beside him. I waited for more until I realized it was over.

"That was real good," I said.

Harvey scrunched his nose. "Shoot, Topher. You sure are dumb." He put his hands together and lifted them high. In his best deep voice he said, "Make him smart!"

I lifted my hands and said, "Make him see!" I tried to do a voice like Harvey's but it sounded like my mother when I do something bad, so I ended up laughing instead.

He grinned and snorted. Then he snorted some more and rolled in the dirt because he couldn't control it. I still had the twig I used to draw, and I threw it at him but missed. One of the dogs picked it up and took it away so I couldn't steal it back. Ms. Viola poked her head out the screen door. She probably thought we were in a lot of trouble, but when she saw the two of us laughing like crazy, she went back inside.

When we got control of ourselves I said, "Hey, let's pretend to feel the stars. Let's pretend they're real hot, but they can't burn us because we have extra tough skin."

He snorted but said, "Alright" and leaned back to rest his head on his arms.

I leaned back, too. "There's millions of them, and they're twinkling all over like they're singing." I squeezed my eyes shut, and I couldn't see a thing.

My parents were probably worried about me and would call my name in the

streets after they took care of the broken woman. They would show up at Harvey's house and have a long talk with Ms. Viola and make me follow them home afterwards, but I didn't think I would go with them, because the two of us were real happy in our sanctuary of stars and dust.

The Insurance Salesman

Toby Bayer never could figure out his father. On the brightest days he watched his bedroom wall, and when rain fell he clapped his hands and smiled more than he did in a week. Toby cracked jokes on these days, but he tiptoed through the house when his father hid from the sun. His old man could be a real jerk when he watched the wall. Sometimes his mother stuck her head in their bedroom and told him there was no need in sulking the way he was. He always replied the same: “Woman, I wish you’d leave me alone.”

On nice days Toby liked to hit rocks with an old baseball bat in the backyard, and when his mother opened the screen door and said something about deadbeats, he mumbled in agreement. She slammed the door and yelled in the kitchen, where she heated fried chicken on a plate, and silenced herself before going back to the bedroom with the old man’s lunch. Toby thought it was better that his father stay in bed during his moods, because when he left the covers and roamed the house, meanness walked right beside him. If the tea kettle whistled too long, he grabbed his wife’s arm and told her to hush it up. He could have married someone else, he told her, because women like a man in a business suit. The house would have been cleaner and less noisy, too. That did her in for the day. She put one foot in front of the other like a fast-moving soldier all the way to the grocery store, but she came back with nothing. After she slammed a casserole on the table, she sulked on the couch and cursed his name until darkness filled the living room.

Sometimes he pushed her without any reason at all. If he had a bad day selling

insurance or the truck engine sputtered at the stop sign up the road, he took it out on her. She occasionally broke bones and told people she fell on the porch steps when they were icy with frost or slick with rain. Sometimes she wore a cast on her arm because she had a bike wreck while riding the neighborhood loop. That's what she told them.

She threw a weekend party every Christmas. Once she cut green construction paper into cedar trees and wrote "Bayer Christmas Party" in red marker, she mailed them to neighbors and relatives and the preacher and his congregation. She placed food with toothpicks on plastic plates and hung shiny garland over doorframes. Throughout the year, she stored old candy canes in a kitchen drawer, but she placed them in a mason jar beside the kitchen sink before the party. She carefully unwrapped each piece of the nativity and arranged it on the mantle according to the picture on the box. She never let Toby help because she was the only one who knew how to do it properly. The neighborhood kids messed with the nativity every year, so Toby didn't much understand his mother's obsession with the thing.

Before the party, his father fished a crinkled tie from his underwear drawer then knotted it close to his neck and slicked back the hair around his ears. He greeted everyone that walked through the door with a toothy smile and a high five for the men and a polite nod for the women. Over cheap beer he talked about his work. All the guests had bought their life insurance from his fake, black leather briefcase, and he took careful measure to make them feel "protected when life's storms roll around." He had that slogan printed on small, paper cards that he kept in an outside pocket of his briefcase, and he threw in those words for his final sales pitch to uninsured townspeople. He liked to tell the story of a

couple he knew who refused insurance and the wife died only a week later, leaving the husband in a big mess.

"Here came that miserable man struggling to get up my driveway with his big belly stickin' out," he said, "and you know what he asked me?" The crowd around him had themselves slung around his finger and widened their eyes. The preacher was on his third beer and yelled, "Tell us Ned!"

"'Can I have that insurance now?' That's what he asked me! I said, 'She's dead, brother!'"

The crowd really liked that. They threw their heads back into their necks and slapped each other on the backs. His father laughed so hard he spilled his beer, leaving a round stain at his feet. He told the same story every year, but sometimes the husband died and in her grief the woman begged his father for a kiss. "No, I am not that kind of man," he told the crowd, and they nodded in approval while the preacher gripped his shoulder and grinned.

Toby's two aunts were the only ones who didn't like the old man. When he laughed loudly and opened another beer, his mother's sisters squinted and said in a hushed voice, "Carrie, is Ned hittin' you?"

"I've told you," she said, "that man does not hit me. He is good."

"That bruise--"

"And the way you look at him--"

"I said no."

Even the preacher was worried about her safety, they told her. Toby thought he was some preacher since he never did a thing about it. His old man put a twenty in the plate on Sundays and was real charming to people who lived outside of his house.

Then the sisters looked at Toby, who stood a few feet away poking the nativity with a toothpick. He could see them from the corner of his eye but pretended not to have heard the conversation. He wanted to shout, “She’s lying! Her arms are blue and her bones get broken because of him!” but his father leaned against the doorframe of the living room, laughing about cheap coffins, so Toby kept quiet. Every year was the same.

The home changed when he was fifteen. The paneled walls his mother hated were the same and the beer stain from the Christmas party hadn’t come out of the carpet, but his father walked around the house like a perpetual sun. While he still regarded Toby with an indifferent gruffness and grumbled if a dish needed more salt, the brightness outside no longer put him under the covers for the day. Instead, he put on his suit and with his briefcase in hand walked to nearby neighborhoods to sell insurance. When he got home his forehead glistened from the heat and he sat at the dinner table. Sometimes he didn’t make a sound except a slurp or a request for the salt shaker, and sometimes he looked over the flower centerpiece at Toby.

“You been practicing ball lately?” he asked one night.

“Not for a while.”

His father grabbed a napkin and rubbed his lips. “Ah well,” he said, “can’t keep to one thing all your life.”

Once dinner was finished and his father went to take a shower, Toby loaded the dishwasher while his mother wrapped leftovers.

"What's wrong with him?" he asked.

"I don't know. But let's be careful not to ruin it."

Toby's mother was happy too. She only broke one bone the entire year, and that was the result of a water puddle from the leaking dishwasher. When it was time for the Christmas invitations to be mailed, he ironed his tie and hung it over the towel rack in the bathroom hallway. He was in such a good mood that Toby worked up the courage to ask for a .22 caliber target pistol to open on Christmas morning. His father huffed and told him his mother would cry every time he touched the thing. Then he turned the volume up on the TV and didn't say anything else. Toby took that as a somewhat positive sign and left the living room to let his father relax in peace.

On the Tuesday before the party, his father came home early. He threw his briefcase against the wall and slammed the back door a moment later. Toby heard from his bedroom and stuck his head around the doorframe. He walked into the kitchen where his mother sorted bills on the counter. She was breathing fast, and she looked like she could have thrown a briefcase too.

"What was that about?" he asked.

"Probably just a bad sales day." She lifted her head and smiled, like she wasn't worried, but her forehead creased when she looked down again.

His father didn't sell insurance the rest of the week. He slept in his bed a lot, and when he was awake, he watched TV from the living room couch and didn't want anyone talking to him. Toby figured his father had sold all the insurance there was to sell, or maybe he lost his job. That would explain his mother's nervousness with the bills. Toby was on Christmas break, so he stayed in his room for most of the time unless his mother

knocked on the door. She asked what kind of food she should serve at the party and she held two sweaters side by side and wondered which she should wear. Toby figured she just wanted someone to talk to, so he answered her questions the best he could.

Toby had to greet everyone on the night of the party because his father said he wouldn't do it that year. A big fight had broken out in the kitchen that afternoon, with his mother's upper arm getting a blue bruise. So Toby yelled from his bedroom that he would greet the guests. When the preacher walked the stone path to the door with an open bottle in his hand, he yelled, "Little Ned!" He grabbed Toby by the shoulder and laughed like he'd just heard a funny joke then opened the door and announced his arrival. People swarmed around him like he was the messiah in the flesh and men slapped his back while women smoothed their skirts and grinned. Toby walked inside and shut the door. He knew no one else was coming because the preacher arrived forty minutes late every year.

He walked to the kitchen and found that the fried pickles were gone and only one finger sandwich remained on a plastic plate. His mother had always told him not to take the last of something, so he grabbed a store bought cookie and returned to the living room. His mother stood with her back facing him as she arranged the nativity that some of the kids had scrambled. Her sisters stood in a corner beside the small Christmas tree and whispered to each other and one of them stopped her whispers to look at his mother's arm. His aunt squared her shoulders and held her head high as she walked to the nativity and said, "Carrie." Toby didn't care to observe the rest, so he stepped toward the couch where Mr. Dodds from up the hill was already really drunk. He wore a loose grin and his tie draped over his bulging stomach as he spread his legs before him and hummed a Christmas tune. He slapped the space beside him when he saw Toby and said, "Ho ho!"

"Hows you doin' boy?" he asked once Toby sat. A dot of spit glistened on his chin, and he grinned to show crooked teeth.

"I'm fine." He had a dull ache in his temple from all the noise. Then he added, "How are you?"

"Mighty good. M-iii-ghty good." Mr. Dodds perched a foot on the coffee table and continued humming.

Toby looked around the room. His mother waved away her sisters as she walked into the kitchen. A group of men stood in the center of the room taking turns telling stories of women and work, and the preacher spoke and laughed loudest. His father sat in a tattered armchair beside a window and drank slowly from a bottle.

Mr. Dodds interrupted his tune and said, "Your daddy's not hisself." Then he started to hum "Deck the Halls."

His mother came from the kitchen and squeezed past some guests to get to the armchair. She bent and whispered. When his father made no indication that he'd heard her, she grabbed the bottle and whispered again, this time with a grimace. Toby thought for sure a big scene would break out. His mother would get a new bruise or a new cast and her sisters would yell, "We knew that man was no good!" Everyone for years after would talk about the abuse discovered at the Bayers' annual Christmas party. But his father just huffed and walked out the back door.

"Ned's getting some more beer from the cooler out back," his mother told the room. Mr. Dodds gurgled a response and the preacher raised his bottle and shouted a praise to the Lord. She smiled and nodded. Then she noticed a little girl trying to steal a

nativity donkey and pushed through the guests. Toby stood and left the humming drunk alone.

"What!" Mr. Dodds said.

"I'm going to talk to my mama."

Her hands were on her hips and her back was turned from the crowd when he approached. He tapped her shoulder and asked if he could go to his room for the night because the noise was giving him a headache. She turned and picked a hair stuck in her lipstick before she said, "Don't leave me with this party."

"It's your party."

She picked lint from her sweater and twisted her oversized skirt around her waist to center the zipper. Her cheeks were flushed. She said, "I mail the invitations and get everything ready. The party and its people are for your daddy."

Toby was about to say that if the party and its people were for his father then he should stop feeling sorry for himself and put on his show like he did each year, but before he could open his mouth something like an explosion went off in the backyard. His mother threw her hands in front of her face and a kid screamed.

The preacher lifted a beer and said, "The second coming!"

His mother's cheeks deepened in shade, and she said, "I'll go see what all that was." She ran through the screen door with Toby on her heels. Some of the guests gathered around the door to watch.

A light shone from the shed window. His mother stopped at the shed's shaggy welcome mat and turned.

"I want you to stay here."

"I'll go with you."

She shook her head and opened the door. A few seconds later she said, "Oh God." Then she made a sound Toby had never heard. It was like a gag and shout that got mixed on the way out. He left his place on the mat and ran in after her. There his father lay, sprawled on the concrete floor of the backyard shed, with a bullet hole through his temple. A pistol was thrown a few feet from him.

Toby had only learned the family owned a gun during the past summer. They had been in the kitchen, where his mother was serving biscuits to go with the pork on the table and his father was telling Toby of the insurance business. After his mother sat and said a prayer, they ate in silence until a noise came from out back. His father dropped his knife and ran to the living room. He fell to his knees and stuck his hand behind the TV stand, and when he stood, a pistol was in his grip. Before Toby could say a thing his father was out the door. His mother yelled, "Ned!" and a loud bang followed. He walked inside with a grin and said, "Racoon." Then he raised the pistol and said, "This here is what you use if someone tries mess with you. The law won't get you for protecting yourself and your things, see?"

Toby thought he could never shoot a person but as he stared at the blood on the floor he realized his father could. Through the shed window he saw some guests run out the screen door. The preacher was in front, his arms swishing side to side as he ran to keep his place. One of the old men from the church had his tie zipped in his pants. A lady flung off her heels to run through the grass, and Mr. Dodds stumbled behind them.

His mother's pink cheeks had drained. She was white and green, and Toby didn't know whether to catch her or move out of her way. The guests barged through the door

and gathered around Toby and his mother. The barefooted lady screamed and ran away, and a man turned to throw up.

The preacher said, “Halleluiah! He is at the gates now.” An old man grumbled at him to be quiet.

Toby didn’t know what to think. He didn’t feel a loss like that of losing a friend, but he thought that a son should never see his own father sprawled on a concrete floor with a bullet hole through the temple.

Once his mother pushed through the crowd to get to the kitchen telephone, Mr. Dodds stumbled to the front and said, “He’s dead as can be.” Toby told everyone to go home.

That night, as he sat at his desk and stared at his cuticles, he heard his mother pace the hall. He opened his door and asked if she was alright. Her bare feet had rubbed a track in the carpet, and she wore a blue bathrobe tied at the waist.

“Should we have a church funeral?” she asked.

“That would be funny, don’t you think?”

“There will be questions if we don’t. I think we will.”

She rubbed her palms against the bathrobe and walked to her closed bedroom door. Before she turned the knob she looked over her shoulder and said, “I’m sorry about your daddy, Toby.”

Word had spread about the Bayer Christmas party by the next morning. Casseroles were dropped off and kids stopped in the street and dared each other to walk in the yard. The preacher came over and said he could perform the funeral. He suggested Toby or his mother give a small speech, but Toby didn’t like speaking in front of crowds.

His mother said she couldn't bear it. Toby's aunts knocked on the door after lunch to help, but they spent most of the time trying to get the truth out of his mother.

"Carrie, there's nothing to be scared of now," they said as she sorted documents.

Toby sat at the kitchen table and flipped through a small pile of old pictures. His mother had asked him to find one of his father for the program.

"Toby."

He looked up to see his aunts watching him. They wanted him to spill the truth that their sister wouldn't. His mother said, "Leave him alone."

After he found a picture and set it on the kitchen counter, he sat in his bedroom with the door cracked open. He heard one of his aunts say to the other, "I'm going to make her tell us one of these days."

The funeral was on Friday afternoon. Christmas Eve was the next day, so his mother said a lot of people may not come. A lot of people did come, though. The small church was full to the back pew and the preacher attributed this to how great Toby's father was.

"No one was a better provider and friend," he said.

An old woman from the church choir sang a song that was supposed to make people cry, but Toby's mother stared ahead. He heard sniffs behind him, so he looked over his shoulder. Some of the women that attended the Christmas party sat together a few pews back. They dabbed tissues to their eyes and noses like a synchronized machine. He looked some more and saw Mr. Dodds near the back with a loose tie around his neck. He was like a stone, lips tightly pressed and eyes unblinking, and Toby wondered if he was drunk or truly sad.

He looked down at the program. He'd chosen a picture of his father smiling with a beer in his hand. It was taken at the preacher's house during a ballgame, and just before he'd left the house, he gave Toby's mother two bruises on her wrists. Only his face would be shown on the program, his mother said, so they could use that one. It was a secret between the two of them, the man that his father really was.

They didn't have a graveside service. They were already taking time from people, and watching a man have dirt thrown on him would just take more. When the casket rolled through the big oak doors, mournful organ music swelled around the church. Toby's eyes stung like tears were getting ready to roll down and he looked away from his mother. He wasn't going to cry, but he thought the church really wanted him to.

When the service was over some people came to the front. A lot of them were strangers with sad faces. Women hugged his mother like she was a fragile doll and some of the men talked to her like a child. They wanted her to fall apart. Toby stood to the side and looked around. His mother had placed big ferns on each side of the altar. "Your daddy was not a man who would've wanted flowers anywhere near his dead body," she said. A woman Toby had never seen leaned against the wall on the other side of the sanctuary. She had thin brown hair and was squeezed in a deep blue dress. She made no attempt to join the group offering sympathies, and she didn't make eye contact with any of them. She only studied the front of the program and occasionally stopped to stare at the wooden panels of the ceiling before she looked down again.

Toby felt a heavy tap on his shoulder and turned to see Mr. Dodds. He wore a plastic rose pinned to his shirt and had a silver flask barely stuffed into his coat pocket.

"Only the good die young," he said. Then he hummed the tune and stumbled away.

The woman at the opposite wall left with the last mourners after they said how sorry they were and walked from the sanctuary. The preacher was standing at the doors where he had clapped people on the backs as they left. He walked over and said, "Carrie and Little Ned, may you find peace and protection in the arms of God Almighty!" His mother nodded and said she was sure they would.

"Let's go, then," his mother said once the preacher left. She got her purse and program from the front pew. They walked through the parking lot to the truck, and Toby saw the woman crying in her car.

"Do you know who that is?" he asked.

She stopped to look and said, "I can't keep up with everyone in this town."

They drove with the Christmas station playing on the radio. When they got home they warmed a casserole and sat at the table. His mother said a prayer and the two ate in silence. Both of them filled a second plate, and she got a third.

He noticed a change in his mother the next day. He wasn't sure if it was because the funeral was over or because she had plenty of casseroles in the freezer, but she was different. Her chest rose and fell in slow, even breaths. She stood a little taller, like something had been sitting on her shoulders his whole life but he just hadn't known any different, and the wrinkles on her forehead were smoother than they had been in years. She had a lot of new ideas.

"I'm going to paint the walls. Green, maybe. And have this carpet pulled up," she said.

"Where you going to get that money?"

"We have some money. Your daddy just never let me use it."

"If you have the money you should do what you want with it."

She nodded a little. Then, as if realizing the truth of what Toby said, she nodded more and put her hands together like she was going to say a prayer.

"Then I will," she said.

They exchanged a few gifts the next morning. Toby's mother gave him a new pack of socks because she was tired of seeing holes in them every time she did laundry. She also gave him two shirts to wear to school. He bought her a cast iron skillet she'd seen on TV. He used birthday money from his aunts. After the Christmas holidays, she made phone calls about the renovations and got different people to come over and give an estimate of the cost. She hired the most expensive company and told them they could start as soon as they wanted. They told her they could begin in two days to give her enough time to clear the walls and the living room.

Toby's aunts came over to help prepare the house. His mother invited them herself, and she seemed excited to see them when she opened the door. They hadn't attended the funeral because they didn't like the old man, but his mother didn't seem to mind. One of the sisters talked about her husband's snoring problems.

"I wake up and swear there's a goat next to me!" she said.

His mother giggled. Then she bent over with a wall clock in her hands and made a noise like a pig. She stood straight, then bent again, snorting and laughing so loud Toby was afraid something was wrong. He didn't think the joke was that funny, but he had to help move furniture, so he was forced to stay in the living room if they needed him.

The other sister said, “Frank is so quiet I keep thinking he’s dead!”

They all laughed some more until one of them said, “Carrie, are you missing Ned so bad?” They both squinted and parted their lips like they were waiting to find out the truth before taking a breath.

“I’m doing fine. We’re doing okay.” She looked at Toby and nodded her head.

“You are so strong. If it were me you’d all have to drag me out of bed every morning.”

“Yes, same with me.”

“I have Toby,” his mother said.

Once the walls were clear and his aunts went home, Toby’s mother asked him to find places for the trinkets and magazines taken from the coffee table and TV stand. He placed the figurine of porcelain prairie children on the kitchen counter beside tattered cookbooks. He put the wooden bird on his mother’s dresser but didn’t know where to store the magazines. They didn’t have a bookshelf. His father once said those were too expensive and made people look like smart alecks. He didn’t want to open his mother’s dresser because he wasn’t sure what he’d find, so he decided to put the papers in a bedside table drawer. The thing was an old, wooden box that creaked anytime it was touched just the slightest. The drawer wasn’t supported with brackets so it fell out if it wasn’t caught. Toby opened the drawer slowly to slip the magazines inside, but he saw a pistol handle. He’d thought the family only had one gun, and his mother had told one of the men to take it after she found it that night in the shed.

He eased the drawer out and took the gun. It was a target pistol with a green handle. It was already loaded with ammo. He went to the kitchen where his mother

hummed as she waited on a casserole to heat in the oven. When she saw the gun in Toby's hand her face drooped.

"I've been meaning to give that back to Mr. Dodds," she said.

"Why's his gun here?"

"I bought it from him for your Christmas present after I heard you tell your daddy you wanted one," she said. She opened a drawer and covered her hands in oven mitts.

"Well why didn't you give it to me, then?"

"I changed my mind."

He told her he was fine and could handle a gun without falling apart. She said, "I just didn't want you to hurt yourself."

"I know enough not to do that."

She took the casserole from the oven and opened a half-eaten loaf of bread to go with it, then she filled a plate and poured a glass of milk.

"You going to eat with me?" she asked.

"Can I go shoot it?"

She took her plate to the table and said the gun wasn't his. Toby gripped the handle tighter and said that it was.

"This was the only thing I wanted, not socks or shirts. I'm going to shoot it," he said.

His mother braced her shoulders and narrowed her eyes. He'd never seen her look fiercer, and he thought if she were an animal she would attack him right there. She took a bite and looked out the window at the purple sky.

"You go, but be sure you're still you when you come back."

Toby stopped at the shed to get a cardboard box before he walked to the open lawn behind the house. He set the box beside a tree stump and stood far enough away to get a good shot. He was no good. The bullet missed the box and landed somewhere in the grass instead. He shot once more before he saw a blue ball poking through the grass several yards away. He threw it at a tree but it landed way past his target. The sun was nearly gone, and the sky was a deep blue like the sea, so he decided to grab the box and go home.

As he trudged through the grass he thought about all the people who'd gone to his father's funeral. Drunk Mr. Dodds paid his respects and everyone who attended the Christmas parties went too. His aunts weren't there, but that was normal. The preacher couldn't wait to talk in front of everyone about the old man. Ladies told his mother that the picture on the program really captured his father's spirit. Old men nodded at Toby like he was one of them. Even people who didn't know the Bayers were there, like the woman who leaned against the wall. Toby stopped. He didn't know if the new gun and the feel of his finger on a trigger aged him, but he realized right there in the grass that the woman in the blue dress was in love with his father.

He dropped the box and lifted the pistol to the sky with both hands. He fired shots one after the other, and the earth around him shook. He stopped to see how much ammo was left. A neighbor yelled, "You'll kill yourself and all of us with you if you don't stop that racket!" Toby lifted the gun and shot his last two bullets, and when a bunch of crows flew over, he barely missed one in the middle. Then he picked up the box and, thinking of his mother alone at the kitchen table, continued on home.

Around the Sun

Her father was diagnosed with melanoma when he was thirty-nine years old. The doctor numbed the spot and dug a trench through his back, and the scar gave him great pride. “Let me show you,” he’d say as he pulled his buttoned shirt and grinned over his shoulder, watching for a reaction of disgust, then awe. He’d be fine, he said. Life would keep rolling. And it did.

He didn’t like to spend a lot of money, but every other summer he packed the car and drove her to the Alabama coast. He liked to bury his toes in the sand and pull them out again, over and over. When she wasn’t using it, he propped on a bodyboard and let the waves collide with him, and seaweed clung to his shoulders when he stood. He made sure they applied sunscreen every two hours. Their skin shone with the sun like grease, and before they went to their hotel room for a sandwich he used the public water hose to wash the sand from her feet. Then he washed his. Later they walked along the ocean’s edge as the sky turned pink and purple. She was sure they walked miles and miles. She once asked if they had wandered into another state, and when her father’s eyes widened and his crooked mouth twitched mischievously, she felt bolder than she ever had before, and she wondered if he did too.

When a few years passed and the pencil marks on the doorframe grew, the spot came back deeper than before, and he watched from shaded lawn as life passed. Fogged water and sand grains were traded for shaded mountaintops of Tennessee, but when expenses drove her father into his pillow, summer days were either spent at the town’s

small carnival or at home among distant barking and loud engines roaring through wooded back roads.

During the long, hot days, she found large cushions from the cluttered backyard shed and arranged them on a metal lounger. It was the same sun that beamed on the shore, so she closed her eyes and watched the light flicker across her eyelids. She often fell asleep, and one afternoon in mid-July she woke to snapping twigs. Her father stood under a nearby tree with a tattered cap settled low over his eyes.

"Did you put on sunscreen?" he asked.

She hadn't, but she needed color, she told him. With a frown he turned away, shaking his head slowly. He later told her only a fool would see a seven-inch scar on a man's back and beg for the same.

She left for a university during his second remission. To save money for an apartment, she fit children for shoes at the local Shoe Carnival. She took out student loans to pay for classes because her father had to draw from her college fund for treatments during his second recurrence. He had knocked on her bedroom door on a Monday night to tell her so, and his hands jittered with the crumpled receipts that he never took from his jacket pockets. She understood, she told him, yet that night she fell into a fitful sleep. When she saw pancakes on the kitchen table the next morning, she couldn't help but feel angry as she ate.

Together, they loaded his car with packed boxes. A lamp rattled in the backseat as they travelled the bleak highway. He played old music and cleared his throat several times before he asked how often she would come back, and she told him that depended on her weekend plans. He joked of parties, knowing of her comfort in a bookstore with

quiet people rather than in a loud home. She grinned as he laughed, and after an excited shout issued from his lips, he turned and told her she was going to college. He faced the road again, and she noticed his smile fade.

He called her every other day for the first month. He waited until her afternoon class finished and asked about her day and her grades. She'd sit at the kitchen table with a book open before her and reply with few syllables. Once the call ended she made soup and ate to the drone of the television, then she paced the living room as she read and peeked from the window blinds when she heard a loud truck or the laugh of a neighbor. After a few hours, she went to bed and woke the next morning to replay the same routine again. By her second semester, he didn't call as much. She travelled home every weekend and grieved when she had to travel back. The closeness of the university and her apartment filled her mind with deadlines and robbed her of peaceful sleep, but she managed to escape when she walked the backyard woods and ate dinner across from her father rather than alone. Although only a few days separated them from their next reunion, they hugged before he watched her drive away.

Her senior year generated concerns she'd never experienced. Employment bogged her mind as she dazedly walked the pavemented path to her classes, and feelings of inadequacy woke her in the early morning hours. She feared what came after she walked the stage to accept her diploma and smiled for a picture with her father. While classmates spoke of graduate programs and moving away, she twisted her hands and watched birds out the window. She tried to maintain the grades her father took pride in. She wrote papers by lamplight and completed her assigned reading before the sun rose the next morning. When she flipped off the light and tried to sleep, guilt told her she wasn't

working enough.

She became indifferent to school when the melanoma returned three weeks before Christmas. The two sat on either side of the kitchen table and ate a greasy delivered pizza, and her father made a joke about the news anchor on the television before he cleared his throat and told her. He took a bite and motioned to the screen again. The man's hair kills him, he said. She stood and emptied a half-eaten slice into the trashcan and asked if it was bad. Her father cleared his throat and said it was.

She took her final exams the following week. Her concern for studying and grades disappeared at her father's words, and she took the tests with interrupted concentration and no interest in the outcome. When professors bade her a happy holiday, she smiled and returned the gesture with enthusiasm that would fool street psychics, but when she turned to leave she frowned again.

They spent Christmas at home. Her father gave her a small ring he'd found at the local jeweler's. He was excited to give it to her, he said, because it was real silver and had a small freshwater pearl inlaid on top. She worried about the cost, but he shook his head and told her it was Christmas. For him she bought three collared shirts and a pair of flannel pajama bottoms with her school's logo at the waistband. He scooped them in his arms and went to his bedroom, and he came back wearing the flannel. He fell asleep to old music that afternoon. The sickness didn't look to be on him then. He looked like a child with his lips parted and his left hand hanging limply from the armrest, and he wrinkled his forehead like he was in a bad dream and couldn't get out.

When she packed her bags for her last semester, she was sure to include a pamphlet she'd picked up during his doctor's appointment. She had sat in the waiting

room while he met with specialists, and when she saw the pamphlet in a plastic cubby by the receptionist's desk, she read it. Once he walked into the lobby with a crooked grimace and a pile of paperwork, she knew it was bad. He told her he might change, that fatigue might overtake him some days or shirts may eventually hang from his shoulders. She'd already read the pamphlet. She already knew.

Her days on campus became more distant and lonely. Although she once felt emboldened in the classroom, she stumbled over her words during discussions and watched the cracks in the pavement as she walked the campus. When she saw an old friend in the library or in passing, she pretended not to notice. She drove the two miles to her apartment immediately following her last class, and she spent evenings on the couch while others her age attended parties or went to dinner with friends. She couldn't find motivation for anything except worry, and a haze clouded her thoughts. The unknown after graduation caused her to grit her teeth in the night and twist her fingers during the day. The books she was assigned didn't mean much to her, and she couldn't lose herself in printed pages like she once could. She paced the perimeter of her living room and often wandered to the kitchen cabinets, where she opened and closed them before laying her head on a couch cushion again, waiting for the weekend to come.

He didn't call much during the week. She had a lot to get done, and he told her he didn't want to be a bother, but sometimes she called with questions about rent payment or the water bill. When the conversation turned to school, she feigned enthusiasm. He told her she was smart. She'd change the topic to his health, and after a brief explanation of fatigue he made a joke about his weight loss and how he could eat as much as he wanted. On her weekend visits, she noticed the tie around his flannel pajamas hung longer than it

had the previous weekend, and when she asked if he needed another pair, he asked if she was eating enough. They spoke like that for a few minutes more, turning in circles, before she let him go.

On a warm Friday in March, he called during her lunch break. The only calls she received during that time were from marketers or wrong numbers. She remembered he'd gone to a doctor's appointment that morning, and she answered with an expectation of bad news.

He asked about her day. His voice didn't have the solemn tone it did that night at the kitchen table. She gave a single syllable response and waited. He told her the carnival was in town and thought they could go that afternoon. She hadn't asked to go there since she was young, when they would purchase wristbands that allowed access to any ride, but she only liked the ones that spun. He hated those but didn't want her to go alone, so he grimaced through each spin and tried to keep his stomach afterward. He bought her an animal balloon from a skinny man with a thin mustache. Once the moon replaced the sun, fireworks colored the sky while they ate hot dogs.

She asked him why he wanted to go. He only told her he thought it might be fun. They agreed to meet at four that afternoon, in front of the entrance gate. He would wear a blue shirt and a green cap, he said, in case she couldn't see him in the crowd.

She walked to her last class in a daze. Her father had gotten thin, and his skin was light yellow. He fell asleep to old music earlier than he used to, and clothes drooped from his bony frame.

She drove an hour to the carnival and saw him standing near the ticket booth with his arms crossed over his chest. He lifted a hand when he spotted her, and after they

bought tickets they stood on the other side of the gate.

It was different than she remembered. Rides and booths were scattered in a mall parking lot. Plastic barriers separated shoppers from the creaking metal and crying children within its perimeters, and she turned when a high school classmate exited a store. Her father asked what she wanted to do first-- if she was hungry or had a certain ride in mind. They roamed the lot in search of the spinning lily pads. She spotted them beside the ring toss, but when she approached the short line of children and noticed the age restriction, she turned and motioned for her father to turn as well. They stood awkwardly under the sun and scanned the lot for something to do. He commented on the heat and asked if she needed water. She didn't. Then he pointed and gave a shout.

They made their way for the small imitation of a Ferris wheel. It creaked like the metal might rust and disintegrate before their eyes. She told him they might fall out if they rode, and he said a person could die at any given time. He laughed and told her the wheel had been used for years and was fine. Only two carriages were occupied, and no one stood in line. When the wheel stopped two minutes later, he took the tickets from his back pocket and showed the operator, who had a bored expression and smelled strongly of smoke.

They were the only two on the ride. He looked around the lot with a big smile, and when their carriage reached the top, he pumped his fists in the air and told her to do the same. She watched him. He didn't look much different than he had the previous weekend. His cheeks sunk a little and his belt was fastened to the smallest size. He had small bags that matched the blue of his eyes. He told her he used to take her on the Ferris wheel when he couldn't stomach more whirling rides and asked if she remembered. She

said she did. When he asked about school she said it was fine, and he nodded and said he was proud. He pulled his cap lower over his eyes.

"Did you wear sunscreen?" she asked.

"Yes. Did you?"

"I didn't have any with me."

He stretched and dug around in his jean pocket. He handed her his car keys that had a small tube of sunscreen hanging from a chain. She rubbed a little on her nose and gave it back.

Their tickets only allowed three rides before they had to buy another one, so after they circled for twenty minutes he told her to wait. The sky had turned a light pink after the sun lowered under a cloud, and some stragglers left the lot and drove away. He took the fraying leather wallet from his back pocket and walked through the gate to the ticket booth, and when he returned he held several in his hand. Before the two climbed into a carriage, he asked the operator when the fireworks started. They didn't have fireworks, he was told.

They were silent for a few minutes as cars sped the streets and maneuvered through the parking lot below. A light wind came with the evening, and department store signs lit in the waning light. He stuck his arm over the side of the carriage and said how much nicer it felt than the heat. She said nothing. He pulled his arm back in and told her that school would be over soon enough and that she really was doing well. She took a strand of hair and rubbed it between her fingers.

"Just tell me. Please," she said.

A corner of his mouth lifted in a smile, and he asked her what she meant. She was

angry. She was no longer a child that had to be coaxed into relaxation by a Ferris wheel or an acting father.

"Tell me," she said.

He adjusted his cap and looked at the deep purple clouds. She looked too. Light pink cut through the purple, like small bits of cotton candy. He said, "I wouldn't tell you something like that at a carnival."

Short, brown wisps of his hair blew in the breeze. He told he was no better, but no worse either.

"We'll keep rolling," he said.

She watched him as light streamed from a break in the clouds, and for a moment a thin, golden beam shone across his face.